A "rational" Dragon Ball fanfiction. When Goku was a child, falling and hitting his head erased his memory and completely changed his life. What would have happened if instead of making him forget, that incident had made him much smarter than he was? Meet a new Goku - who's much more clever, has a taste for philosophy, and a bit of a dark side...

This story has been inspired by LessWrong's "Harry Potter and the Methods of Rationality". There's quite a bit of 'rational' fics that follow a similar principle to that one, but I couldn't find any on Dragon Ball, so here I am.

The main premise is: what if Goku hitting his head when he was a child, instead of simply giving him amnesia, had made him way smarter than he was? However, just like LessWrong in HPMOR, that is not the only change I've made to the setting - some characters are a bit different, I've added backstories or motivations to some others, and so on. Expect the story to diverge pretty wildly as we go on and these changes influence the setting more and more. In general however I still wanted to keep the feel of Dragon Ball, so don't expect any hard scientific rigour or anything like that - the Dragon World is pretty crazy and it can't really be contained easily in a set of rules! But there's going to be some science-y talk here and there because I'm a nerd and Bulma is too.

I don't have a regular schedule for updating in mind but hopefully I can keep it to one chapter more or less every week. I'll try to keep a bit ahead with the writing in any event. I hope the story is fun to read as much as it is for me to write!
Disclaimer: the idea and characters of Dragon Ball are owned by Akira Toriyama. This is a simple non-profit fan parody.
The child was lying in bed, on sheets wet with his sweat; his scruffy hair stuck to his forehead, encrusted with dry blood. His breath was irregular, and his skin flushed by a fever. He kept his eyes closed, and barely moved, except for the rapid up-and-down movement of his chest, and the occasional twitching of his monkey tail.

The old man, sitting beside him, had little to do except drenching a towel in cold water, wringing it, using it to cool down the child's temperature, and damning his own stupidity and carelessness.

He could have prayed, but was not sure that would help. They say you have only six degrees of separation, at most, from any person on the planet. He knew for sure he had three from God, and that removed a bit of the mystique from the whole affair.

So he drenched the towel.

Wrung it.

Put it on the child's forehead.

And damned his stupidity.

So passed the night.

At morning, the child looked like he was improving - which really, should not have been possible at all. For all the man had ever known of human physiology, by all means, that child should have been dead by now. But then again, the prehensile tail that occasionally instinctively wrapped around his wrist, as if seeking a comforting touch, remembered him that the child was not human.

The head wound caused by that fatal fall off a cliff was frighteningly deep. He had to coat his own hands in a thin layer of ki to sterilise them and remove with his own fingers - as delicately as possible - shards of skull bone from the child's soft and exposed brain. And yet he was recovering. He had always possessed this incredible vitality - each wound healing at breakneck speed, skin and bones and muscle growing fast to mend the damage, without scar, heck, even better than they were before he would have sworn, harder, stronger. One day he would break his arm in training, and one week later he would be back in action, his punches more powerful than ever. The old man had been wondering what the limit of that ability could possibly be, and now he was discovering it, and wished he didn't have to. But at least, the child was recovering. It had taken almost one month, but the bone was slowly sealing closed again. The fever was still high but not as crazy as the first days. He was resting more or less serene, rather than being horribly stiff, and then suddenly jerking like in a seizure, as it had happened for the first days.

For the first time in one whole month, the old man allowed himself to relax a bit. Immediately, he nodded off, and fell asleep.

"Grandpa?"

He startled back up, thinking he must have only dreamt the voice.

The child was sitting up in the bed, his eyes open and lively, if a bit confused. He looked fine.

"Goku!" cried the old man, in joy "You're awake!"
"Of course I am," replied the child, a bit perplexed "if I were not, how could I be talking to you?"

The Optimised Wish Project

A Dragon Ball fanfiction by Gan_HOPE326

Chapter 1 - Pride, prejudice, and Dragon Balls

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single girl in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a boyfriend. Usually, finding one would not be a matter of great concern, more so if the girl herself has been well endowed by Nature with gifts of beauty and grace. For some, it may be a question of having meetings organised by their families with scions of equally worthy descent until they finally meet their perfect match. For others, the matter may be settled less formally, by mingling with people the same age, at parties or other such social gatherings.

Bulma Briefs being the eccentric, headstrong, stupendously clever, and exceptionally hard to please heiress she was, elected to grab a capsule case, a few supplies, and go on a road trip around the world, chasing after seven magical items with a radar of her own making.

Now, it might be a legitimate question to ask why would such a smart and ambitious girl, given the chance to have one wish miraculously granted, opt for something as seemingly bland as asking for a boyfriend. Part of it might have been that she wasn't still really sure that any of this was real at all - shining glass balls that emitted a weak electromagnetic signal and ancient stories read in dusty books were hardly proof of supernatural portents - so she didn't really confront the question with as much seriousness as it may deserve. But it wasn't just that. In her mind, growing up in a house with a vapid mother she couldn't really spend much time with without ending up bored to death and a father that, while able to provide more stimulating company, would also mostly pass his life immersed in whatever projects he busied himself with at the moment, she had built up the ideal of a boyfriend as a life companion, someone she could finally relate to as an equal, both able to pay attention to her and to keep her interest.

And then she had grown up, and she had started meeting boys, and they were all dumb as fuck.

Well, she was probably the most brilliant mind in her age group, so that was all very relative, but still. The kind of rich boys she would usually meet were useless spoiled brats; whatever brains they had were dulled out by the comforts of an easy, unchallenging life. And so she had started to despair. She was already 16, so she was absolutely, positively sure that if she couldn't find a decent boyfriend right now she would end up alone or together with someone with half her brain like her father had and then still basically be alone and it's not like this was about parental abandonment issues or a desperate plea for attention or anything.

Some would have wished for wealth, or power, or immortality. But she already had the first, did not care for the second, and the third, well, she wouldn't feel too good about cheating her scientific genius out of such a worthy challenge.

But a decent boyfriend? Now that would really take a miracle.
The small car was having a bit of a hard time climbing the twisty, steep roads of Mount Paozu. Still, slowly but surely, with a low gear ingrained, it was making progress. Using a flying vehicle would have been perhaps far more convenient, but with the dense foliage and uneven terrain all around it would have been much more difficult to find a convenient landing spot.

_I wish for a boyfriend; said boyfriend must be a male human in an age range between 16 and 20 who satisfies all my internal criteria for physical attractiveness and personal compatibility up to as high a degree as reasonable; he has to not be coerced into becoming such, but take the choice of his own free will upon meeting me; our meeting can come to fruition through any circumstances that make it the most natural, but not later than six months from now._

During her trip, thinking about the exact form of her wish had become one of Bulma's best ways to kill time as she drove or piloted lazily across largely barren landscapes. She had read her share of stories about malevolent genies and monkey's paws; and while the legends about the Dragon Balls did not suggest that Shenron, the wish-granting dragon, was malicious, you never knew. And it was a nice exercise to look for all the logical loopholes. Bulma could not stop herself from imagining with a tinge of pride that she may be acknowledged as the one who laid down the best phrased wish in history by an eternal divine being.

Speaking of divine, if Shenron could really do anything, did that not mean that he could also probably create human life?

_I wish for a boyfriend; said boyfriend must be a male human in an age range between 16 and 20 who satisfies all my internal criteria for physical attractiveness and personal compatibility up to as high a degree as reasonable; he has to exist and have lived and grown up naturally as a human being at the time of this wish, and he has to not be coerced into becoming such, but take the choice of his own free will upon meeting me; our meeting can come to fruition through any circumstances that make it the most natural, but not later than six months from now._

There, that was better. The thought of having a sentient being materialised at your beck and call for such purposes felt decidedly creepy.

The summit was close now. The radar kept blipping, marking a spot somewhere ahead of her; the third dimension indicator suggested she was almost level now. The signal was very clear and strong, which suggested the Dragon Ball must lay somewhere out in the open, or at most inside a building with thin walls. No caves or deep fissures, luckily. That would have made the recovery much trickier.

Wait a second, what if the dragon didn't listen to all of her wish but just started granting it as soon as she expressed the key request?

_Dragon, I will now lay down my wish; it is not to be granted until you hear again the words 'please grant my wish'. I wish for a boyfriend; said boyfriend must be a male human in an age range between 16 and 20 who satisfies all my internal criteria for physical attractiveness and personal compatibility up to as high a degree as reasonable; he has to exist and having lived and grown up naturally as a human being at the time of this wish, and he has to not be coerced into becoming such, but take the choice of his own free will upon meeting me; our meeting can come to fruition through any circumstances that make it the most natural, but not later than six months from now. Please grant my wish!_

Fixed.

The car entered a large clearing. There was a hut in the middle, some chopped wood left out in front
of it, and no one in sight. The Dragon Ball was closer than ten meters now, and the accuracy of the radar started getting a bit wonky at this range. Bulma would need to follow the signal carefully and keep an eye on the blip's fluctuations on the screen. She stopped the car, carefully opened the door, and started stepping out. The silence would have felt almost scary to her just a few weeks ago, when she had never left the city, but now she was getting used to it. She quietly put a hand on the holster on her belt and drew the gun, with a slightly shaking hand.

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The rock, almost two meters in diameter, flew high in the air, darkening the sun for a moment. Then, as it was falling down, Goku's fist rose to meet it in the perfect spot where every stress would be amplified through its shape and cracks; and Goku jumped through it, while the stone broke into pieces before him and ended up shattered on the ground.

He landed safely on a single foot, balancing himself with his tail, so he did not step on any shards with sharp edges.

The rock was now many rocks. Did it even make sense to think of it any more as 'the rock', Goku thought in slight amusement? None of the resulting fragments had any less the properties of rock-ness than the original did; nor did their shape feel especially more incongruous, though the fresh edges were still to be weathered and smoothed by time and wear.

It was time to end the morning training for today and go have lunch, so he went back to where he had left his day's catch. The deer had been cleaved sharply in two by a hit of his pole. Still, there was no mistaking it, those were merely two halves of one, single, deer. His identity had not been lost, even when broken. Was it because the deer had such a much more well defined shape than a rock? Was it because it was alive, because somewhere in his animal mind he still used to have a simple, blurry notion of myself that a rock never would? Was it then right to cleave it in two, to divide what wanted to stay one?

Goku sighed, as he slapped the animal's remains on his shoulders. Not the first time his musings led him to consider vegetarianism, nor the last, most likely. But grandpa had always told him that a healthy martial artist, strong in body and mind, also needed meat to build his own muscle. And it was not like the forest was not full of predators who would kill prey without a second thought just the same. So he would cook the deer, and eat it, and its flesh would become his flesh. What would that mean; where would the deer end, and Goku begin?

Then he saw the infernal creature standing in the middle of the clearing in front of the house; and next to it, what looked to all effects like another human. He let all thoughts instantly slide away and reverted back to his purely instinctual self. Like one of those predators he was thinking about a moment early - he dropped his catch, in silence, then slid the pole he kept tied to his back out of its scabbard, and carefully walked around until the sun was behind him, and the wind came from the front. The infernal creature was now between him and the human, which placed him in the human's blind spot, and that was just fine. He could take one out before the other even had time to realise what was happening. And he did not fear the human, but whatever was unknown was a potential danger. In times like these, he would stop questioning, and just act.

Swiftly and surely, he emerged from the bushes, and with a scream, he commanded his pole to extend, right as it smashed into that portentous monster.

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Of all the noises Bulma was trying to keep an ear out for in the middle of this gods-forgotten mountainous wilderness, "scrapyard car compactor" was not one she expected. Her heart jumped in
her throat, and she quickly turned around to see a wild kid with scruffy hair and a monkey's tail systematically turning her car into an equivalent amount of bent metal and shattered glass with a pole that was apparently made of wood and at least three times his body length.

She blinked.

Yep, still the same scene.

She rose her gun to the level.

"Stop doing that!" she screamed.

The kid stopped and raised his eyes to meet her. He did not look feral as before, but he didn't seem scared either, though his body language made him look somewhat wary. Rather, his eyes betrayed only a glimpse of genuine curiosity.

"You can lower your weapon." he said "Or at least, that is what I imagine that is."

"It is." answered Bulma, uncertainly relaxing her grip. She didn't really feel like shooting a young kid, anyway. "Why did you smash my car, but are okay with me?"

"You, I know I can beat." he stated, matter-of-factly. That felt unnerving, coming from the boy who had just wrecked a car with a wooden staff.

"Well, here's to hoping you won't need to." said the girl, putting the gun back in the holster. "Who are you?"

"An interesting question. What would you expect to be a satisfactory answer? I could give you my name, of course, but that would not convey anything of my true essence - it is, after all, but a conventional moniker used to refer to the person that is myself. In fact, it could be said to be even more devoid of meaning as right now no one alive knows my name except me, so I could tell you anything else, and it would be equally valid. Or I could tell you about my life - which would probably not be the intended answer, and would still not tell you much about who I am, as a simple series of events does not inform you of how those events shaped me, specifically. Nor would the me who lived those events be the same that faces you right now - as this is the me that has gone through them, and has been changed by them."

He paused a bit, lost in thought.

"Your name will do fine." uttered Bulma, a bit stunned.

Of all things she could possibly expect from a wild kid with a monkey's tail who grew up in the mountains, philosophising was not one of them.

"Very well, we shall settle for that for now." answered the kid, shrugging "My name is Son Goku."

"Nice to meet you, Goku. And I'm... I mean, my name is Bulma Briefs."

She stood still, her hands raised, while Goku slowly walked closer and inspected her. He went around, and even prodded at her with his pole. Bulma noticed the pole looked shorter than before, but thought better than inquiring about that at this moment. She needed to get out of this pinch first and earn his trust. Still, she was awfully curious about that.

"You seem alright." concluded Goku "I don't think you're dangerous. Still, your body is unusual. I assume you're a female? Those look like mammarys."
"How tactful." wryly commented Bulma "Why, yes, I am a girl. Never seen one before, have you?"

"Read mentions about them in books." commented Goku absent-mindedly "And I see that animals have males and females, so it just seemed natural to me."

"Books? You have books here?"

"My grandpa used to bring me lots when I asked. After he died, I haven't gotten any new ones though."

Bulma registered this as potentially useful information. She wasn't sure she had any books beyond science texts and instruction manuals with her to trade with, but it should not have been too hard to get more.

"Very well. You don't seem like you pose a danger." concluded Goku "Can you tell me what was that thing?"

"That thing that you smashed to tiny pieces was my car." answered Bulma, not without a tinge of irritation "You really don't know about them? How sheltered are you? I imagine books would mention them."

"Mine don't. What was it for?"

"It was a piece of machinery. Like a carriage that moves on its own."

"Oh, transportation. I see." Goku almost seemed disappointed "I guess I got alarmed for nothing. I apologise for destroying your property." he finally concluded, bowing slightly.

Seeing his politeness, Bulma finally relaxed and smiled.

"What's done is done. Don't worry - I have plenty of replacements for it." she laughed. "But still, I would say you owe me one, Son Goku."

"I suppose that's fair."

Goku had said he considered her safe, but still, he seemed perpetually on his guard; and he did not stop for one moment looking inquisitive about her, her clothing, and general appearance. Well, not too strange given this was his first time seeing a girl (and apparently any human at all in quite some time). He sat down on a rock at a couple of meters of distance, and nonchalantly kept his staff out of its scabbard, leaning on his shoulder.

"You are very strong." commented Bulma.

"I learned the martial arts from my grandpa. Now I train by myself every day."

"Well, yes, but... you seem stronger than I would have expected, still. Human muscles should not be able to do something like that", and she waved in the direction of the smashed car "no matter how strong they get."

"Well, obviously your knowledge is wrong." calmly replied Goku "Because I just did that, in front of your eyes. And I will tell you, my grandpa was stronger than me. And he said his master was stronger still."

"Mmmm." Bulma got thoughtful "I wonder. I would like it if some day you allowed me to test your strength."
"In combat? You would not stand a chance."

"My, no!" she laughed "I have machines. Well, not here. Forget it for now."

"I see. So, have you come this far just looking for me?

"To... test my strength?"

"Not at all! I did not know you were even here. Wait a moment."

Bulma turned around, grabbed a sack and started rummaging into it. She pulled out two glassy orange globes, roughly the size of a grapefruit. They had small red stars shining inside.

"I am looking for these."

Goku extended a hand; Bulma had a moment of hesitation but then let him take one of the balls, touch it and weigh it.

"They're called Dragon Balls. They are ancient artefacts, and I know that one of them should be around here."

"I know." said Goku "It's in my hut. Mine has four stars inside. From this one, that has five, I imagine there are at least two more out there?"

Bulma blinked. This boy, she was realising, was pretty smart. He lacked experience and knowledge of the world, what with having grown up alone in a hut on the mountains and all, but still, his logic was quick and ready. More so, he was incredibly strong. He looked peaceful, now, but he still was the one who had wrecked her car only minutes ago without a moment's hesitation - nor knowing what it was in the first place. She started seeing potential danger in telling all of the truth. She would have to tread carefully.

"Four, in fact. They are seven in total. And I'm looking for them thanks to an invention of mine - a radar."

"Radar?"

"A machine that tells me where something is."

She kept it in her bag, though. The kid would not have been able to tell which was it if she didn't show him.

"So, why are you looking for these balls?"

"Well, they're rare, and unusual, and rather pretty. And there's a legend that says when all seven are gathered a dragon appears and grants a wish of your choosing, imagine that!" she added as an afterthought and with a chuckle.

"So you are curious about this legend, and find out if it is true?"

"I am sceptical. But I've seen weird things - you are one of them now - and I'm a woman of science, and so I am willing to do the experiment, so to say."

And hope that the results are likeable, romantic, and with sculpted abs.

"So you want me to part with my Dragon Ball?"

"Not for free, of course. I can pay you, or buy you anything that can be bought. I am very rich!"
"I do not care much for possessions." said Goku, with a pensive look "You are supposed to own much more than I do, yet you are the one risking your life, traveling the world to get something that you ardently wish. Wouldn't you say, perhaps, that I am the rich one?"

"Until you can afford to erase the entirety of East City's public debt with pocket money, I wouldn't." replied Bulma, piqued "Not all things can be bought with money. And all that I have does not mean I can not wish for more. The way I see it, living in the mountains, alone, you don't even know what you could wish for. It's not that you don't have any wishes; rather, you do not even know your own wishes."

"That is an interesting thought. Still, I do not want to part from my Dragon Ball, for any price."

"Why is it? It has no value, alone."

Goku, sitting cross legged, gazed off in the sky.

"It used to belong to my grandfather. When I examine my own feelings about it, they are complex. My rational mind knows that it is just an inanimate object, and yet it is like a link to him for me, as if his own soul still resided in my house. I apologise for not making any sense."

Bulma smiled. She didn't know if she would have really gotten along with this old man, but the way the kid was talking about him made her sort of wish she'd met him.

"You are making a lot more sense than you think. I understand what you mean. But!" and she got suddenly up, clapping her hands, as if to shake that melancholic mood she wasn't too fond of - "We are at a bit of an impasse here. What do you say about this - you come with me, and bring your Dragon Ball with you. When we all seven are gathered, we try to summon the dragon - and if, as it's most likely, nothing happens, then you get to bring it back here, having had a nice fun trip on the side."

"What if they do work? What happens to them?"

"Oh, well, in that case - wait, why do you think something happens at all?"

"I'm not sure." said the kid, thoughtful "I was just thinking, if they really granted a wish, and could be used repeatedly and kept gathered in the same place, the first one who gathered them would still have them, and rule the world as an immortal God-king by now. So I imagine something happens to them."

Well, the cat was out of the bag on this one too. After all, it would have been pretty cynical not to tell him anyway.

"Yes, you're right. Once they're used, supposedly, the Balls scatter across the world again. And then they are inactive for a certain amount of time."

"I see. How much is that? One century?"

"Actually, that's where you're wrong." said Bulma with a grin "According to the stories, it's only one year. I guess the ancient ones didn't count on me and modern science to break the game so utterly. It might have been a daunting challenge in times past, but now? I can fly around the world in the space of a few days, and track the balls wherever they are. So basically, if they do work, I can guarantee a yield of one wish per year."

"That is a lot." said Goku, impressed.
"It really is. And if I don't do it, someone else will, so it might just be time for that immortal God-king thing to happen anyway."

The kid was somewhat less impressed at this.

"Come on, I was joking. I would not go for something that boring. Which actually makes it a fair deal better for the world that it is me to have control over this technology. And means I can offer you something else."

"What would that be?"

Bulma stretched her hand with one finger out, right in front of Goku's face.

"One wish. If it works, one year from now, you get to be the one who gathers the Dragon Balls again - with my help - and has his wish granted."

"What about my Dragon Ball? I would need to wait two years to have it back then."

"I'm offering you nigh omnipotence, Goku. I thought you were smarter. Forget any dusty old memories of your grandpa. With one wish, you can have him back."

Bulma felt slightly bad about this - like she was manipulating him, and to an extent, she was, but it's not like she was lying. She would really offer him that. Heck, if the Dragon Balls worked, she would damn sure find a way to make the best out of them. One wish for the person who helped her make that come true was the least she could offer.

"Thanks, but no." slowly replied Goku, after a long pause "Grandpa always said that people who die go in heaven and are happy forever. I do not know that to be true - nor see how anyone could be sure - but the idea appears a lot in the books I read, and I can not know enough to discard it. If he really was in such a place, bringing him back here for my own enjoyment would be an act of selfishness."

"Oh, come on, you don't really believe..." Bulma started saying, but then she stopped herself. Of course he believed - he needed to. And well, they were talking resurrecting people with a magical wish granting dragon anyway. If that was really possible, an afterlife wasn't such a big deal either.

"Well, what about this." she suggested then "You come with me. We find the other Dragon Balls, and travel together. You get to know more of the world, and understand more of what you could have outside of here. Broaden your knowledge. Maybe you'll get some ideas about this, or you will understand better what you want. At the end, if the Balls don't work, you get your own back, and all goes back to normal. If they do work, I will give you hospitality in the city for one year, and will teach you about the world, and science, and anything you'd like to know - you can read any of my books too. Then we'll go, and find your Dragon Ball. And you get to decide if we stop when we find it, and then you get custody of it, or if with your new knowledge you will have found a way to use it."

Of course, there was a danger to this path - that he might really want to hold onto the Ball. That would have meant that using them again would have been extraordinarily hard. But Bulma was confident that one year was enough to corrupt this small ascetic philosopher into a healthy desire for some kind of supernatural boon, and then again, she was not taking all of this really seriously at some level. Because, wish granting dragons? Come on.

Goku thought about this proposal, and finally:

"I accept." he said "This sounds like an experience I might have to gain from. Just looking at you
The hut was tiny and cramped, but mostly clean - all it smelled of was dust and old paper. Bulma finally got to lay her eyes on the books that the kid's fabled grandpa had hoarded for him over years, and it was indeed a weird selection, a hodgepodge of random texts that were probably as much the product of chance as they were of choice. A lot of them looked really old, and Bulma wondered whether there must be some monastery close where the old man went to occasionally barter for a copy of a manuscript, because they seemed mostly religious and philosophical texts belonging to various famous masters' schools of thought. She thought she had heard of some of them. Others were probably simply the result of a purchase from a travelling merchant, or perhaps just found after they were lost by some tourist hiking across the mountains. Still, none of them seemed to go enough in depth, or be new enough, to teach Goku something as basic as what a car was.

In the only clean corner of the entire room, free from all encumbrance, lie a small altar, and on top of it, sitting on a red cushion with gold trimmings, was the four-star Dragon Ball. It was positioned so that just at this time of day, a ray of light would fall on it from the hut's door, and it was shining like an orange sun in the dim light of the room. Looking at it like this, it did have something holy about itself, and Bulma felt a bit unreasonably guilty at the thought of removing it from there, likely to never put it back again.

"This, and this." said Goku, finishing his rummaging of the huge pile of texts all around. "I have all I need to bring. We can go."

Next to him was a meter-tall pile of badly bound yellow old paper.

"Well, you certainly won't have to worry about running out of stuff to read, huh?"

"Don't worry, I'll carry them. It's good training." replied Goku.

"Oh no you're not! We're not walking. I said I had replacements for the car."

Goku looked around, puzzled: "But surely we must get down from the mountain, first. I don't see anything here. Where would those be?"

Bulma chuckled and patted her bag: "Right here, country boy. Right here."

"Material objects have properties like extension and mass that don't naturally change." protested Goku, calmly "Nothing that fits inside that tiny bag could carry us."

"You would believe so, of course..." Bulma was in full-on boasting mode and just generally having a blast "Let me introduce you to the wonders of science, country boy! For I am the daughter of the Briefs family, the heiress to the fortune of Capsule Corp., and it's all thanks to us if the world has stopped worrying about such meaningless stuff long ago now!"

She extracted a small box from her bag, opened it, and revealed a number of elongated capsules carefully numbered and slotted inside. She then grabbed one after a bit of consideration and walked outside. Trying to make her gesture as theatrical as possible, she clicked the button on the capsule, pulled back her arm and tossed it to the ground. As soon as it hit the soil, the capsule exploded in a puff of smoke, and as it dissipated, a huge, powerful motorbike with a big tail pack for luggage
"Ta-da!" exclaimed Bulma triumphantly.

"Oh, so it was a magic item!" said Goku, with a laugh "I did not think that you would have one too."

"This is not magic. This is just science. A careful and creative enough application of quantum field theory, tweaking around with interaction paths that allow non-equivalent conversion of mass and energy. Awfully convenient. Boy, I remember reading once a paper about how an hypothetical universe whose laws strictly enforced mass-energy conservation would look like, and damn, that would suck so hard."

"I did not understand a single word of that. Are you sure that is not actually magic?"

"It's completely different! Science makes sense, while magic, well, doesn't. Or wouldn't, if it did exist."

"That seems contradictory. You are going on this whole trip to find seven magical items, and you don't think magic is real?"

"I've never seen it." shrugged Bulma "If I have to find out it does exist, searching for magical items seems a fun way to do it. And I get a wish granted thrown in."

"You don't need the Dragon Balls for that. I have a magical item right here. My fighting pole, the Nyoibo."

Goku grabbed the extremity of his pole and extracted it from its scabbard.

"Oh, right!" exclaimed the girl "I have been wanting to ask you about that. It seemed to me that it was sort of longer, earlier. But it's obviously made of simple wood, so it's not like there's any way it could possibly..."

"Stick, get longer!" yelled Goku.

And the pole magically extended to thrice its initial length, conking Bulma right in her forehead.
"Ok, so, try to stretch it again."

After a day of travelling, Bulma and Goku were sitting in the comfort of a warm, fully equipped house, that protected them from the cold and the potential dangers of the night outside. Inside this house, that had been materialised from a capsule as big as a human thumb, Bulma was losing her mind while trying to figure out how could a one-meter long stick possibly become longer than that. This had been going on for a while.

Goku held the Nyoibo horizontal, between two chairs that Bulma had pushed against it on either side. The chairs were heavily weighed with whatever she could put her hands on - mostly books and tools - so that their mass should be at least similar.

"Stick, get longer." said Goku, with a somewhat less enthusiastic voice than usual.

The stick glowed with a faint red light and started stretching. Finding itself impeded by the chairs, it didn't immediately zoom out, and buckled a bit under the pressure, but then it looked like it picked itself up, stiffened, straightened up, and started pushing more; the chairs were toppled, and the books and tools fell on the ground. Goku comfortably held a now two-meter long stick, perfectly horizontal with respect to the ground.

Bulma's right eyelid twitched violently.

"This thing does not exert a constant force, nor has constant elastic properties!" she screamed, in frustration "How the heck does it even know how long should it get?"

"I just sort of picture it in my mind." explained Goku, helpfully.

"ARRGH!"

She tossed the papers she was taking notes on in frustration, sat on a desk, and grabbed her head between her hands.

"Why are you so angry? Your capsules do much more impressive things."

"My capsules make sense. They have internal mechanisms and are incredibly complex. This is just a freaking wooden stick."

"It just means there is something you ignore about it. The wise knows there is always more to know."

"Yes, but it drives me mad!"

Bulma sat for a while, beaten, her head abandoned on the desk. She did not know what was more exasperating - the stick, or Goku's absolute jadedness about that inexplicable supernatural prodigy he kept using simply to bludgeon things that needed bludgeoning. She started realising how different their respective worlds must have been, growing up. She'd lived in a city her entire life. And life
seemed more... ordered, there. She had just started peeking in the vast wilderness that were the less urbanised parts of the planet, and had already noticed that there was a bit more of a chaos, less regularity in the laws of social life. Safety was not to be taken for granted; she had ran from bandits and had defended against animal attacks. Now, as it turned out, she discovered the laws of nature themselves seemed a bit more elastic.

The sad thing was, she couldn't even be sure this wasn't something that her illustrious predecessors, the people who had written the books she had studied on, had simply ignored and scoffed at. After all, she had heard stories from the boons too - but no one believed stories from the boons. If a few ancient relics of great power, and people able to wield them, existed scattered around the countryside, who would have found out? As long as the people holding them didn't think there was anything special about them. Goku certainly didn't look like he did.

"Listen, Goku," she said "the fact is, people like me, scientists - my father, too - we work on this idea that the world follows rules. That there is a logic to all things. That if you do a certain thing in a certain way, and then do it again, in the same exact way, the same effects will verify. Do you follow me?"

Goku nodded.

"Well, we have found out some of these rules. I will give you books to read about them if you're interested, but it might take... some time to teach you the basics you need to even understand them. Point is, once we find them out, we can use them to make stuff happen. But since the rules are not simple, usually it takes a complex machine to exploit them. Something that has a lot of parts that do different things. Just like you can understand why a deer moves because it has muscles, and bones, and organs, but it would be weird to see a wooden statue of a deer just come to life and walk around, right?"

"I can understand that." agreed Goku "But then, why are you sure that such rules exist in the first place? Or that they are always respected? Even in the face of something that does not respect them?"

"Because! Because..." Bulma threw her hands in the air "Heck if I know. Because it sounds like it makes more sense, I guess. In a way no one really knows for sure. Maybe your stick really is the only thing that has no rules in this universe and that's how things are. Guess I will find out when I find out if a magical wish dragon can make me meet the love of my life."

"Love? Love is only an abstract concept used to describe a state of mind. How could you meet it?"

"Forget about that!" Bulma cut short. Now that she had said it out loud, it sounded embarrassing and stupid. And she certainly didn't want to start talking about grown up stuff with this kid who was, like, at least three years younger than her. "You should go to bed. It's late, kids need their sleep."

"What a weirdly specific observation. So do adults." objected Goku, but he didn't disagree much, as this was his chance to stop being part of Bulma's experimental setup. He shortened the stick back and put it in its scabbard, then went to the room they had agreed before was his to sleep in, and closed the door behind him. Even having never lived in such a modern house, he was quick to learn - all that Bulma had to do was show him once how to do things, and he just picked them up immediately.

Bulma was left alone in the room, thinking about dragons, and love, and magic, and the unbelievable conspiracy the universe was setting up just with the explicit purpose of driving her nuts.

The next morning, Bulma and Goku were standing outside of the house, in full gear for the next
day's trip. Bulma wore a different getup from the day before - a casual but comfortable set of clothes, with jeans, sneakers and a wind jacket over a light T-shirt. Goku wore the same exact gi as the day before. And the day before, and the one before, suspected Bulma.

"How often do you wash that thing you're wearing?" she asked, eyeing him badly.

"Wash?" was the puzzled answer.

Bulma sighed. She'd teach him how to do laundry when they stopped for the next night; for now, all she could do was make sure he was always upwind with respect to her. She opened a small panel on the side of the house and pressed a few buttons. She dismissed hastily the usual warning message about making sure that no living things or other capsules were left inside the house before initiating re-capsulation, then, when the instructions recommended she take at least ten steps back for her own safety, she barely took one. The house burst into a puff of smoke, and before the smoke was even dissipated she plunged her hand inside it to grab a flying capsule, without looking. She put it back at its place in her case and retrieved another, pausing a little to choose which one.

"Today's a nice day!" she proclaimed finally as she picked "Even if it means going a bit slower, I feel like motorcycling a bit longer."

As she turned, and she was about to click and toss the capsule, she found Goku staring at something in the middle of the road, followed his eyes, and started staring herself.

In front of them was a massive Turtle.

"Hello," said the Turtle.

"Hello," answered Goku, politely.

"Goku," asked Bulma "why are you talking with a turtle?"

"Because she's the one who started. It would have been rude not to answer." explained the boy.

"And I appreciate that." interjected the turtle.

Bulma took a deep breath and tried to keep calm and cool-minded. Humanoid animal races were a thing, after all. This was hardly much different, except for, well, the humanoid part, since it was just a simple, normal looking, turtle.

Who could speak.

She decided to just roll with it.

"Very well, Miss Turtle..."

"Mister." corrected the Turtle.

"Mister Turtle. I hope that you will have a good day. Sadly, we can not spend much more time in your delightful company. We have to leave, as we have a long way to go before this evening."

"I thought you just picked a means of transportation that is not the fastest at your disposal?" pointed out Goku.

"How helpful you can be, Goku." hissed Bulma "Now let's go."

She had a bad feeling about this.
"I need your help!" pleaded the Turtle.

And here we go, thought Bulma. It's not that she was opposed in principle to the idea of helping others, really. It just tended to waste so much of her time and energy when she did. Her mother had always said that as a member of the Briefs family, you had to learn when not to think too much about the fate of those less fortunate than you - as that would basically encompass everybody else, anyway.

"I need your help." repeated the Turtle "As you may see, I am a turtle, not a tortoise. I live in the ocean. I am not supposed to dwell on land but I have, sort of..."

"Got lost? By at least 200 kilometers?"

The Turtle seemed to think about it for a moment: "Well, yes, I suppose."

"And I thought you were slow creatures."

"Oh, yes, we are. Which is why going back to the sea is so troublesome for me. I have been wandering for weeks now. You seem to have some sort of transportation, so, I was hoping..."

"Forget it." cut short Bulma, not wanting to listen a second more "Goku, come with me. Adventure awaits!"

Goku stood next to the Turtle, and did not budge.

"Bulma, the Turtle needs help, and it is within our power to give it to him." he calmly explained "I really think you should consider this."

"I did consider it. For all of the twentieth part of a second. The answer my brilliant brain came up with is: not my problem."

The kid gave her a stern look.

"You can not avoid the weight of ethical choices simply by ignoring them. It became your problem from the moment you heard about his plight."

"Which is why I did not want to hear about it in the first place!"

"Which means you had already guessed it. Which means you were already involved."

"The kid is sharp." said the Turtle, admiringly.

"Oh, like a razor blade." commented curtly Bulma.

"In case this helps you make your decision, know that if I will not go back to the ocean, I will die!" added the Turtle. "At some point in the future."

Bulma pressed her hands on her temples. Goku was staring at her judgementally. The Turtle was staring at her pleadingly. There was a marked lack of anyone else around staring at her in ways that might make her not feel like a total dick.

"Oh, whatever, fine!" screamed Bulma, in exasperation. "I guess we can take a little detour. At least I get to take a dip in the ocean, since the weather is so good. It's not like we're racing against someone else looking for the Dragon Balls too, after all."
The sneeze echoed across the tall, empty hall of the castle.

"Are you feeling unwell, your majesty?" asked worriedly a woman with long black hair and wearing military attire to the small blue man sitting on the throne.

"It's nothing really, Mai. I don't have a cold or anything. Probably just the dust of this place. Clean it up some more!"

"As you order, Lord Pilaf."

"Give me that turtle."

The bandit was a huge humanoid bear. He towered all of a couple of meters above both Goku and Bulma, who had first realised his presence behind them when his huge shadow fell on them. On second thought, realised Bulma, a big tree trunk crashed right in the middle of the road as if to purposefully stop any vehicles passing by should have rung all sort of alarms in her head. She realised she really ought to do some work on her street smarts.

If she survived this, obviously.

"Goku, give him the Turtle." she suggested under her breath.

"Hey!" protested the subject of the deal. They had been travelling in a small pickup Bulma pulled out for the occasion from her capsule case, with the cargo bed specially fitted with a plastic tub and few water buckets they had added some salt to in order to keep the Turtle fresh.

"Sorry." she apologised "But really, it's either you or us."

Goku stood silent, looking intently at the bandit, with a bit of a puzzled expression.

Bulma was learning to start fearing that expression. And this was really not the best moment.

"Didn't you hear me? I said give me the turtle! I want to eat it!" roared the bandit, waving his huge curved sword threateningly "Quick, or I will kill you!"

"I heard you." said Goku, plainly "But I don't understand. Why are you asking?"

Bulma, the turtle and the bandit all blinked in confusion.

"I'm giving you a chance, little runt! Do you want to die?"

"Surely not. But why do you care what I want? It would be far easier for you to just kill us all, get the turtle, and possibly steal our goods too. I understand Bulma is very rich. I'm sure she has something of value."

So I die, thought Bulma. Still young and beautiful, on a dusty road in the middle of nowhere, because of a stupid turtle with a terrible sense of direction and a monkey boy far too clever for his own good.

The bandit growled.

"Well, maybe I didn't want to kill you if I didn't need to. You're making me change my mind though!"
"I apologize if I'm being annoying," said Goku, his tone absolutely sincere "Perhaps I have rushed to conclusions, seeing how you seem to care little for moral customs and want to eat our friend Turtle who is, in fact, as much of a sentient being as us and can talk."

"Wait, it can talk?" grunted the bandit.

"As a matter of fact, I can." confirmed the Turtle.

"Well, that is weird. I am not used to talking food. It doesn't feel right."

"I am glad we could come to an understanding," concluded Goku "Surely, then, you would agree to let us go without the need for any violence?"

"I suppose so." muttered the bear, lowering his sword "I was only so damn hungry. Is it too much to ask to find some dinner that can't speak?"

Bulma was speechless. She did not know whether to be offended that the bandit ignored all of her extremely valuable possessions in favour of that old wrinkly turtle, or simply grateful to the world for this amazing new chance at life. What she had just witnessed from Goku was simply the most incredible feat of diplomacy she had ever heard of.

"That's a relief," said the kid "I would not have wanted to hurt you."

"What did you just say?"

Never mind.

The bandit's eyes now were ablaze with anger. His sword was pointed straight at Goku's face. His free hand was trembling in rage and looked like it was ready to grab and squeeze his skull into a pulp - and it was big enough to actually do it.

"I said I would not have wanted to hurt you." repeated Goku "My grandpa told me that martial arts should not be used to hurt or kill if not in time of great need."

"Well, that's rich coming out of a tiny runt like you. Don't worry, this is a time of need." sneered the bandit "Because as soon as I'm finished with you, you're going to need..."

They would never learn what exactly was supposed to be the conclusion of that threat. Because midway through, he had started swinging the sword towards Goku, and that had been the boy's signal to attack. Bulma could barely catch what happened, so fast his movement was. The kid fluidly stepped to the right, pivoting on his foot. The sword hissed through the air so close to him, it trimmed a couple of hair from his head; but Goku extended his hands and grabbed the bear's arm, pushed, and jumped on his palms, landing feet first in the bandit's face. The gigantic beast was sent flying, and as Goku was spinning and landing, his Nyoibo slid out of its scabbard, and flew out, all in a single calculated motion that found his hand ready to grab it, and "Extend!" he screamed, and the pole was now swinging at triple length, aimed straight for the bandit's skull, in a motion so fast and precise that Bulma realised it could only conclude by splitting it in half...

And then it stopped.

The bandit was breathing heavily, in pain, and grasped his chest. His eyes, wide open, were fixated on the tip of the stick that had stopped just five centimetres away from his forehead, and his death. Goku stared rather blankly, then withdrew his weapon, which smoothly shortened itself as he slid it back into the scabbard.
The bear got up, turned, and ran away, without looking back.

"That was amazing." commented Bulma, breathless.

"I would have rather not done that." said Goku "I don't like it. When I fight, I need to let my instinct take control. And as my grandpa always said, I should always let reason be in control of my instinct."

"Oh, come on, he totally had it coming anyway!" laughed the girl, in relief "What would your instinct have you do anyway?"

She looked at Goku and suddenly noticed that he was still somewhat different. He was not tired - he did not break a sweat, in fact - but he was somewhat agitated. His cheeks were red. His lips, slightly retracted over his teeth. His tail - what was up with that again? - swinging nervously, left and right.

"Kill him, of course." he said.

Then he climbed back onto the pickup and slumped into the passenger's chair, as a stunned Bulma went back to sit at the wheel. He did not speak any more as they travelled, and eventually fell asleep, and finally his lineaments relaxed, in the sun of that bright September morning.

"Why are we waiting here again!" cried Bulma loudly, stretching her hands to the sky, in the sun of what was now a still very bright, and rather hot, September afternoon. They were sitting in the middle of the beach, Goku idly observing a pair of crabs as they moved around, Bulma launching invectives against fate for her current predicament. The beach was a very beautiful one indeed, but not exactly a touristic spot. There was plenty of ocean, shells and palms, but no food or drink stalls. Lunchtime had come for one of her portable travel rations and some water from a canteen rather than the ice cream she would have really craved in such weather. Shadow was also very scarce, but damn if she could remember in which of ten luggage capsules she was bringing along she had stored her umbrella. She had ditched her jacket long ago, and now was simply wearing her T-shirt and jeans, but still felt like she was boiling alive. She would have gone for a swim as she had imagined at first, but she couldn't find her bikini either - and even if she did, changing in front of Goku was not an option.

"Turtle said he'd come back with his master and bring us a gift." said Goku, then he went back to his crustacean studies, prodding a bit the crabs with a stick and seeing how they reacted.

"Well that was hours ago!" protested Bulma "I say we should just go."

"That would be a mistake."

"Oh, don't act like you know it all, country boy!" burst out the girl "It's always that attitude with you! You didn't even know what a car was, until yesterday!"

"That is true." admitted Goku "But it's not really relevant. It would be a mistake because they're almost here."

He pointed a finger to the ocean, and sure enough, there they could see something swimming in the water, leaving a white trail behind it, and someone standing on its back, above the surface of the ocean.

"Is he riding the turtle?" wondered Bulma, squinting to see better in the bright sun. The conspiracy to make her doubt her senses and reason happily continued.
Sure enough, he was; and 'he', in this case, was the peculiar figure of a bald old man, wearing an Hawaiian shirt, shorts, flip-flops, and sunglasses. He held a gnarly wooden club in his hand. When the turtle - or rather, Turtle, that old friend of approximately five hours of adventures - was close enough to the beach, the old man jumped, spin flipped mid air, landed gracefully on the sand, and:

"Howdy!" he greeted the two.

Bulma and Goku greeted back, and then stood waiting perplexed as the old man carefully shook the sand that had gotten stuck inside his wet flip flops.

"I hear you've helped my dear subordinate." he finally started "Well done! I am Muten Roshi, the Turtle Master, and I am grateful for your help. I would like to give you a gift as thanks."

"Actually, it was mostly the boy." intervened the Turtle, who had just emerged from the water herself "The girl took a lot of convincing, and then wanted to give me to that bear bandit."

"Which I should have done." hissed back Bulma, thus getting to learn what a turtle sticking its tongue to you looks like.

"Well, I see, I see. Boy, I think I owe you a gift then, at least. Is there anything you would like?"

"I do not know." admitted candidly Goku "I am on this trip to know myself well enough that I can know what it is that I want without knowing, or whether I truly have nothing that I want."

The old man stopped for a second to parse all of that.

"Oh my! What a clever fellow. And wise, for your age. I just have the thing. You might be able to ride it after all. Kintoun!"

A few instants after Muten called, a whooshing sound came from the sky, and a yellow streak crossed it from east to west. Next thing anyone knew, a little yellow cloud stopped with a loud brake right in front of Muten and remained hovering in mid-air.

"...I'm not even going to ask how that works." commented Bulma wryly.

"This is Kintoun!" announced Muten "It's a magical cloud that can fly anywhere in the world, at an amazing speed. But remember - you can only ride it if you are pure of heart!"

Goku's eyes widened in disbelief.

"If what you say is the truth, I do not think I would be worth of such a gift." he stuttered, almost a bit embarrassed "Are you saying this can provide me with an absolute, objective ethical standard?"

Muten raised an eyebrow: "It can... take you places."

"Well, that's only if I pass its judgement. But regardless of that, the implications are amazing! There has never been a way of agreeing on a single universal moral code. Humanity has struggled with that question for centuries, and rivers of blood have been spilled over it. But here is an unfeeling magical item that is able to objectively tell between good and bad people. It means, by observing who can ride it and who can't, we can deduce what good is!"

The kid was now obviously overexcited. Bulma eyed the whole scene with distinct scepticism, and the old man was simply baffled.

"...I guess?" he said in the end, shrugging.
Goku kept circling the cloud, thinking aloud more than talking, and occasionally gesticulating; then, after shutting up and stopping for a moment, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath, and jumped on top of it.

And fell right through, ending up on the ground, his head still wrapped in the intangible yellow vapour.

"I see, that's how things are." he said, getting up and patting the dust off his clothes, without sounding much disappointed.

Muten seemed pretty dismayed: "Oh, I'm sorry boy, I really thought... well, I imagine we all have our hidden depths."

"Say," inquired Bulma, finally butting in "are you able to ride it?"

"Oh, no, my goodness, not really. I am just an old man with a rather sinful mind to boot."

"Huh-uh. And have you ever seen anyone ride it?"

"No, never."

"Ok. And do you know anyone who claimed they could ride it?"

"I don't think so." he said after a moment's thought "Though given the nature of the condition for that, I would imagine they wouldn't be the bragging type."

"Alright. So how do you know anyone can ride it at all?"

"Well, I've been told so by Korin, the cat god who gave it to me."

"You've been told. By a cat god." repeated Bulma, slowly "Did you ever stop to think maybe no one could ride it because it's impossible?"

"Why would that be?" "Because it's a cloud! It's not solid!" the girl shrieked, throwing her hands in the air.

"It's fine, Bulma." stepped in Goku "We don't know for sure he's not right. Truly good people would be very hard to find, after all. I would like to have a few more people try it as a test. In fact, Bulma, would you like to..."

"Don't even think about it." said Bulma, indignant, her arms crossed "I will not subject myself to such humiliation, nor to the judgement of a glorified puff of smoke."

"As you wish. I can't force you. If you ever change your mind, I'd be glad to allow you to try. Still, I think it's an interesting gift, and I am sure it will prove useful, even if I can not ride it. Thank you very much, Master Muten."

And he bowed politely to the old man, who blushed a bit and muttered something about how it was nothing, really.

Bulma was only glad that this surreal detour was finally over, and more than willing to just drop both Turtle and Master to their collective nonsense to focus on her extremely important quest of love and science, when she noticed a tiny detail.

That old fart wore a necklace.
And from that necklace, like a big, orange, extremely garish pearl, was dangling the Three-Star Dragon Ball.

In fact, the detail wasn't tiny at all, and she wondered how the heck didn't she notice earlier, considering her whole life at the moment revolved around those damn things.

"Old man!" she called to him, suddenly more jovial than before "Despite your Turtle friend's... lack of appreciation, I helped save him too! Don't you think I could deserve at least a tiny token of gratitude?"

"Hmmm. Maybe you're right. Turtle, what do you say, perhaps you've been a bit too harsh?"

"If it was for her, I would have died twice, today. She deserves nothing."

Bulma started considering where she could find a good recipe for turtle soup.

"I'm sorry," said Muten "I don't like saying no to a cute girl like you, but I'm afraid that's final."

Friendly tactics failed - time to let the money talk. Bulma dropped all pretences of joviality. She dug into her bag and whipped out a cheque book and a pen.

"Ok, let's talk real, old man. Your necklace. I want it. Give me a price." she said, matter-of-factly, while twirling the pen between her fingers.

"How vulgar!" exclaimed the Master "I do not crave material possessions so much that I could be just bought so easily. I am an hermit after all."

Bulma stared at him for a second.

He stared back.

The pen stopped twirling.

"But..."

He did not stare at her eyes.

"But maybe we could find an agreement, if you could, huh..."

The fingers started pressuring the pen, tense, bending it in the middle.

"...show me... your... panties?"

And the sound of the pen snapping resounded like pistol fire across the entire beach.

Three hours later, the sun was beginning to set, and the situation was still at a stall. Bulma was not willing to concede anything, but did not want to lose the Dragon Ball either, so would keep alternating short haggling sessions with Muten with long indignant silences during which she merely sat alone in a corner of the beach, arms and legs crossed. Muten, with the patience of a true hermit, simply sat and smoked his pipe, confident that eventually Bulma would come around. The Turtle was busy swimming near the shore, lazily gulping down small fish, and pretending he really had nothing to do with the old man. And Goku was puzzled by the whole affair, and how could it possibly be so complicated.
He walked up to Bulma.

"Bulma, why don't you just show him your panties like he asked? It would not cost you anything."
he suggested.

"Absolutely not! It would definitely cost me a lot."

Goku seemed very confused by this.

"Cost you - how? He didn't ask you to give them to him. And you said you are rich anyway."

"Some things are worth more than money! I will *not* show him my panties, even if I have to take the Dragon Ball from his cold dead body!"

"Now," pointed out the kid "that does not sound very ethical."

"Neither does asking underage girls for sexual favours!" screamed Bulma, loud enough for Muten to hear her "And yet, here we are."

Obviously, there was not much reasoning to do on this side. In his efforts to mediate, Goku decided then to focus on the other party of the deal. He stood in front of Muten.

"Howdy, boy!"

"Howdy." repeated Goku, politely "I am sorry that my friend seems to be so stubborn about her panties, but I fear it would not do to insist. If you would not mind, I am willing to show you my underwear in exchange for the Dragon Ball, as a compromise."

A hysterical fit of laughter came from Bulma's direction.

"Well, that is a generous offer. You really are a good kid." complimented him the old man "But see, that just doesn't work for me. I want to see her panties, not yours."

"This is really confusing." protested the boy "She offered you money. You would not gain anything material from seeing her panties. Why do you insist so much?"

"Well, see kid, some things are worth more than money."

Goku did understand this concept, but he had usually heard it applied to highly immaterial ideals - love, wisdom, honour. Panties were a new entry in that category of things.

It was as if there was some kind of coded conversation going on between Bulma and Muten. He was not one for anger, usually, but he could not deny a slight feeling of annoyance at all of this. He found not understanding something so fundamental to all that was happening around him extremely frustrating.

"Alright! Let's get this over with!"

Bulma burst up standing all of a sudden, then walked straight to Muten. The two stood in front of each other for a while, one standing, one sitting, staring into each other's eyes (or sunglasses).

"Old man," she announced "I challenge you to a game!"

"A game. And why would I accept to play?" asked placidly the hermit, puffing smoke from his mouth.
"Because it's a game that involves me stripping."

Muten pulled a handkerchief out and started drying his sweaty forehead.

"Well, I'm listening. Explain." he finally managed to say.

"Alright. Rules of the game!" Goku came closer and started listening intently, hoping to finally understand what the heck was up with these two.

"Rule number one: the game consists of each of us taking turns and removing one article of clothing, or accessory, from our body. The other person has to remove the corresponding article from theirs. The person who refuses, or is unable, to remove any article of clothing in response loses."

"Rule number two: if I were to win, you would give me the Dragon Ball. You don't get anything for winning though."

"That's unfair." protested the old man.

"It's plenty fair. You can get what you want and more already simply by playing the game well, after all."

This, Muten could not really object to, so he let it pass with a shrug.

"Rule number three: to avoid cheating, any clothing must be removed in plain sight. This includes underwear: one must first strip in order to make it visible, remove it, and then can put the other clothes back on."

"Sounds sensible." approved Muten. The incredible possibilities that these rules offered to him did not escape his notice.

"Rule number four: any removed matching articles of clothing will be exchanged with the opponent and will be theirs to keep, even after the end of the game."

"Wait a second." intervened the old man, suspicious "What is the purpose of this rule?"

Bulma smiled: "What, you don't want souvenirs?"

He did, obviously.

"Finally, rule number five: I get the first move. You have ways to get what you want in a single move, so I think that's just fair."

"Ok, I need to deliberate. Give me five minutes."

Muten rushed to the shore, any remains of his composure all but lost. His cheeks were already flushed with blood. He called the Turtle next to him, and as the reptile came laying on the sand at his feet, he explained the rules and Bulma's suspicious proposal.

"She's playing you." proclaimed the Turtle.

"I know she must be. But I can't figure out how."

"Well, she is. So refuse. You don't know how, but she does. She would not do this if she were not sure to win."

"You're right, you're right. But it does not make sense. Rule four, for example, looks like it was
meant just to draw me in. So there must be a trick somewhere else, but where? Maybe she just thinks that I would be embarrassed exposing myself in front of her."

"How little she understands." sighed the Turtle deeply.

"You can say that. I know she can win in one move - if she removes something that I can't. But what is she wearing that I am not?"

"Man, really?" the Turtle seemed disappointed "A bra, obviously."

"A bra! You're right. She can win instantly by removing that. But rule three means that she should do that in plain view, without her shirt on. So..."

"You would get a full frontal view."

"I would. Why would she go for this? Is it just a matter of pride - to show herself on her own terms? Or is she less shy about her boobs than about her panties?"

Muten was supposed to be thinking, but really, his heavy breath by now indicated that rational faculties were quickly abandoning him. Turtle didn't think any of these explanations squared much with the girl who had spent three hours on a hot beach just working out a plan to trick this dirty old man, but then again, it was not like he cared that much, and wanted to go back to fishing, so he just let it go. Mammals and their morbid obsession with milk glands seemed extremely crude to him.

"Ok! I accept!" finally said Muten, walking back to Bulma.

"Took you long enough. And it was such a good deal too."

The girl smiled again, and took place standing right in front of Muten. She made sure he could see her well, and stretched her arms upwards. The old man was completely enthralled.

"My turn first then."

Her hands moved behind her back, towards her neck. As if to prepare to remove her T-shirt.

Muten began hyperventilating.

The hands touched the back of her shirt's neck, moved it a bit. Revealed something under. A golden glint. Her fingers searched for and grabbed something tiny, and started unhooking it.

And as she succeeded, she revealed it - a thin, long golden chain that was tied around her neck and hidden under her shirt until now, almost invisible.

Rule number four: any removed matching articles of clothing will be exchanged with the opponent and will be theirs to keep, even after the end of the game.

"Necklace." she announced, handing it to him with a wide grin.

And Muten could only start slowly untying the rope that kept the Dragon Ball hanging from his neck.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 3 - The best laid plans of pigs and men

The road seemed to stretch unending among the slightly hilly terrain, occasionally turning around in big lazy curves, never really getting challenging. Bulma was driving a small but stylish convertible - one of her most pricey capsules - and Goku was sitting next to her, his gaze lost in the sky. The sun was high, the wind mild, and if there was any speed limit on this road, they sure were not respecting it. Heck, it's not like she was supposed to know how to drive at her age in the first place, forget having a license - but then again, what cop would police this forgotten countryside? Good thing Goku didn't know much about road safety, or he might reprimand her for it.

"So, this scientific method you talk about" said Goku out loud, still looking upwards "basically consists of making a guess about how things work, and then checking if they really do work that way?"

"More like checking if they do not work." answered the girl, keeping her eyes on the road "We make a prediction, we try, and if it does not work, it means the guess was wrong. If it works it means it was only possibly right about that. Could still be wrong a million other ways."

"And you can never be sure that it will keep working."

"Say you punched and broke a thousand rocks. How do you know for sure you will manage to break the next one?"

"Fair enough. So you keep just guessing?"

"Guessing has gotten us pretty far. We all guess all the time anyway." Bulma steered for a tighter curve, taking it at full speed. It was not every day she got a passenger who was unfazed by her style of driving by sheer virtue of ignoring how an actually responsible person was supposed to do it.

"As my father says, we keep guessing until we die. Guess well, and that may happen a bit later."

"I get it." the boy nodded "It's a bit like fighting. You need to understand your opponent, how they think, what they will do next. Catch their patterns."

"Precisely! I think given enough time, you'll become really good at this. You just need to learn the basics."

She grinned.

"Now, here's a practical example - if the theory I used to build my radar is right, I predict we will find a Dragon Ball very soon."

"We've arrived?" Goku inquired, looking at the screen of the Dragon Radar, where a dot was blinking slightly off centre.

"We're within walking distance, and it's better if we approach more carefully. Hold on tight."
The tires screeched and a cloud of dust was lifted from the ground as Bulma braked suddenly. The dust was still settling when they got down and the car went back to being a capsule in her multi-purpose case.

They walked for a bit, Bulma holding her radar and checking it against a map (integration of the two was one of the first features on her to-do list), Goku taking the chance for a bit of training and moving while doing a hand stand. He'd do even weirder things now and then for the sake of packing as much exercise as he could into daily activities, so Bulma barely noticed it any more.

"There!" she announced finally, pointing a finger "It should be in that village."

The village, they found as they walked in, was as plain a bunch of houses you could find, but there was still something very weird to it. Most of it seemed empty. Bulma even managed to pin down the house in which she was sure the Dragon Ball must be held - a low muddy hut with a small front garden and an orange cat dozing off amidst the salad leaves - but to her great frustration, it was locked. Good thing the place was so tiny the owner couldn't be too far away.

"There's noise coming from up ahead." pointed out Goku.

"Let's go check."

The noise was coming from the village's main and only square. A crowd of a few dozens people - so probably everyone - was assembled around a small stage. A two man band was playing music, flowers were hung all around the walls, a girl stood in the middle wearing what passed for an elegant dress in these parts, and everyone looked like they were attending someone's funeral, or possibly their own.

"Well, here they are. We need to talk to someone," commented Bulma "but they all seem pretty busy with whatever's going on."

"So. Much. People!" slowly uttered Goku, in disbelief "Is this what you called a city?"

The girl laughed out loud.

"Silence!" admonished her a nearby old woman, turning brusquely with a gloomy frown "Do you have no respect?"

"I'm sorry." Bulma composed herself, while the boy was still confused as to what did he say that was so funny "I should not have laughed at this... huh..."

"Wedding." finished the other, gravely.

"Sure. Wedding. Who laughs at those, right?" she confirmed "Grim affairs."

The crone did not deign this of an answer, she merely scoffed and turned around.

"So, who is going to the gallows... I mean, getting married?" asked Bulma after a while.

"Sherman's daughter." grumbled the woman "Poor girl. It seems yesterday I would babysit her when her father was away working the fields."

"And now she's marrying! They grow so fast, right?"

"She's eleven!" bawled the old woman, and unable to hold her tears, she just started crying and noisily blowing her nose in a cotton handkerchief.
"Bulma," asked Goku "what is a wedding? It seems like a very sad occasion."

"Usually not this much. Something's wrong."

The woman turned around furious, hurriedly stuffing her handkerchief back in her pocket.

"That damn Oolong! That's what's wrong!" she growled "Have you never heard of him? That crook keeps kidnapping our little girls! He comes around every few weeks and threatens to raze our village if we don't give him whatever girl struck his fancy that time. Then he takes her away and we never see her again. And soon it all repeats. Now he asked for sweet little Pocawatha, poor thing. Says he wants to marry her."

"That's... terrible." said Bulma "Could you really do nothing against him? How strong is he?"

"Oh! Very strong! He has magical powers, and can transform in anything he likes." she answered, the terror audible in her voice.

"Can he really?" Bulma was intrigued now.

"You bet! He becomes the most horrible, invincible things. He can become very big, and very scary!"

"And hideous!" chimed in someone else.

"And full of spikes!"

"And with eyes like embers!"

"And with a roar that's like an earthquake!"

"That is all very intimidating," intervened Goku, candidly "but what can he do?"

An uncomfortable silence spread throughout the crowd, as everyone seemed stunned by the question.

"He can become... very, very big?" suggested tentatively someone.

Goku seemed curious but genuinely trusting of the accounts of the villagers, and probably interested in such extraordinary strength. Meanwhile, however, Bulma started having a creeping suspicion, and she did not know if it made the matter hilarious or much, much more tragic.

"Has he ever hurt anyone?" she inquired.

"No!" answered one of the villagers, completely baffled at the suggestion "Who could possibly dare confront him?"

"Destroyed any property?"

"Not really."

"Did he ever, I don't know, lift something heavy?"

"Did he?" asked someone, and soon the whole crowd was murmuring and mumbling.

Bulma sighed, shaking her head. Then she drew a long breath, and spoke as loud and clear as possible, to be heard by the entire square.
"Attention everyone! I think I have a solution to your little kidnapping problem."

Silence fell on the crowd, and all faces turned towards her.

"However, I will not give it to you for free. All I ask is a certain item that I know is in possession of one of you. Would you be willing to give it to me?"

"Whatever!" screamed someone "We'd do anything to get rid of him!"

No one protested at that, so they probably all agreed.

"Perfect. Remember, you promised!" begun Bulma "In exchange for this little object that you surely would have no use for, I will tell you my little theory about what Oolong is doing, and how to get rid of him and his tyrannical ways forever. So listen up..."

—————

When the large silhouette of a man in a threatening dark suit of armour walked into the village, the silence was total. The warrior looked around, then stepped quickly forward amidst the crowd, which quietly parted, allowing him to walk towards the centre, where the girl in a wedding dress was waiting.

"I'm sorry that this is going to be a bit rushed," a cavernous voice came from inside the helm "but let's try at least to make it cheerful, yes?"

No one seemed to listen. Everyone kept staring, without saying a word, and they didn't seem neither cheerful nor scared. In fact they seemed outright furious.

Before the man could reach the girl, the crowd closed in front of him. A few men stared at him with a grimace, arms crossed. For some reason they had brought pitchforks, which were now leaning on their shoulders.

"Hey, guys, I'm sure you don't realise this, but I can't reach the bride this way..."

He turned around.

The crowd was closing behind him as well.

This was not going according to plan.

"I'm sorry..." he said, his voice now reduced to a mere whimper "Maybe I'll get the bride another time... now I should really... go..."

"GRAB HIM!" roared one of the men, and suddenly the crowd went wild. Screaming, insulting, they started spitting and tossing stones towards the suit of armour. Various rocks hit him, and instead of making a clanking sound they made a wet thud, like smacking on flesh. Oolong screamed in pain and disappeared in a puff of smoke, to reappear transformed into a bat, but it was too late - the crowd was already pressing on him, over him, there was no room to fly. Someone grabbed his wings and started to pull. He turned again before they could rip them, and now he had reverted to his true form, a small pig-man in a military suit.

"BRING HIM TO THE BARN!" screamed again the ringleader, that Oolong now vaguely recognised as the one who would have become his father-in-law today had things not gone so very wrong. Next to him were two people that Oolong was sure he'd never seen in the village - a girl with short blue hair, who would have been quite to his liking had she been a bit younger, and a boy
with messy hair and a monkey tail. The boy just looked a bit disappointed as he was easily
overpowered by the crowd and dragged away. The girl instead rushed next to the leader - Sherman,
was that his name? - and whispered something in his ear.

"DON'T HURT HIM!" ordered the man, obviously repeating the girl's suggestion "WE NEED TO
GET HIM TO TELL US WHERE THE OTHER GIRLS ARE! DON'T HURT HIM YET!"

Yet, noticed Oolong, as cold sweat started dripping down his forehead.

They dragged him inside a barn, on a chair that was prepared in advance with leather straps, and
bind him. He could have transformed into an insect and escaped, but with that much people
around, someone would have stomped on him for sure in the confusion - by accident or on purpose.
He considered a mouse or another small animal until he saw the orange cat that was hissing
threateningly at him from an old lady's arms. Anything bigger would be easily caught.

"Form a circle!" ordered the girl, who had now stepped into the barn with a very bossy attitude
"Drop sandbags around the chair to form a barrier, and close all windows and doors! Kids, go
around the chair, and have your glass jars ready - if he becomes an insect, capture him immediately!
You two, toss the mosquito net on top of him! It must be impossible for him to transform into
something and run away!"

The girl clearly had thought this through. The net prevented him from flying away, and when
Oolong managed to touch the floor with his feet, he suddenly felt something sticky under them - they
had poured molasses all around the chair, making the surface an inescapable trap for anything small
enough to try and go that way.

"Bring me the tools!"

A briefcase appeared and was handed to the girl, who now moved decisively towards him. Oolong
did not like at all where this was going.

"The girls are fine!" he screamed as loud as possible so that everyone could hear him "They are kept
in my house, hidden in a cave under the north mountain. You can find the entrance by following the
stream that comes down from the mountain and turning away from it when you meet a tree split
through its trunk. The cavern is walled and there's a door with an electronic lock. The passcode is
56183!"

As he spat everything out, Oolong's words sounded more and more like a plea. There was a moment
of silence, and the pig could swear he heard someone mumbling in disappointment.

"You, and you, with me!" finally ordered Sherman "Let's go get the girls. Write the instructions
down and bring a rifle in case this guy has accomplices!"

The three men left at a speedy pace. Oolong sighed in relief. In this situation, cutting his losses had
been the right choice. Maybe they would even be a bit more clement now.

He turned to see the girl still coming closer with her briefcase.

"Hey, what are you doing? I told you everything! I swear! Everything!"

"Oh, I know." the girl said nonchalantly "But this is not for that."

The briefcase clicked open. It revealed a full set of chronometers, thermometers, calibres,
dynamometers, and other high precision measurement tools.
"These good people called the cops from the closest city, but even with a plane, it will take them at least four hours to arrive and arrest you. In the meanwhile, to kill the time, you're going to transform for me, precisely in the ways that I will tell you to. And we're going to do some science."

She pulled off a devilish grin.

"This is going to be fun."

"I can't believe that old lady! Even after all I did for their village, I still had to give her a vacuum cleaner from my portable house to convince her to give me the Dragon Ball. Apparently simply telling them that they had been duped like a bunch of idiots by a random jackass wasn't heroic enough to deserve a reward."

Bulma kept mumbling under her breath, annoyed, as she fiddled with the control panel of the airplane. The cockpit's glass darkened a bit at the turn of a knob, making the blinding light of the scorching desert sun somewhat more tolerable.

"No point in getting angry. The Dragon Ball is still much more valuable, is it not?" suggested Goku.

"Yes, of course you're right." sighed the girl "Like always."

Goku didn't react at that, showing neither annoyance nor coyness. The difficulty of reading him was one of the things that bothered Bulma the most.

"Do you believe more in magic now that you could perform some other experiments?" he asked a moment later.

"Well, I have to resign myself to the evidence." Bulma frowned a bit, and her hands clenched the control stick slightly harder "He was definitely using magic. I can't really even try to explain it away. But on the other hand, studying him gave me some ideas about what magic should be. Not a full theory, mind you, but some general directions. Actually, do you mind listening to my reasoning and giving me your opinion?"

"It's fine. Tell me."

"Ok." the girl stopped a moment, collecting her thoughts "So, the first thing that bugged me was, what even is magic? What is there in common between all these phenomena that makes them a single thing rather than a bunch of different laws? And the answer I came to is, they all have to do with the mind shaping reality, directly."

"The Nyoibo responding to my will. That pig person transforming into what he wants."

"And of course, if they work, the Dragon Balls turning the wish of the user into reality." confirmed Bulma "It makes sense, right? But it's also very vague, so I am not sure how to try and falsify it. I guess a form of magic that worked without any sentient being involved at any point would disprove it. I could see if using your voice recording to order your stick to extend works even without you being present."

"I don't think that would work." intervened Goku "I know it doesn't work even if I say it myself but am too distracted to really think about it."

"Which fits with the theory. Oolong said the same thing - that he has to make a conscious effort to keep his form, to the point where he can only last for five minutes before he has to revert. It's
"possible that this could be overcome with better discipline and mental fortitude, but it goes to show anyway that there's an effort involved in maintaining magic, not just summoning it."

"So you think the substance of the mind can alter the world - but only through certain specific items or techniques that we call magic?"

"Yes. And mind you, it creeps me out to just say this out loud because until yesterday I never believed there was a specific 'substance' of the mind at all, or a soul. But I guess it's a possibility on the table now."

"What else?"

"Not much. The pig had limits on how big or small he could become. I suspect these are more limits of his knowledge and imagination than of the magic itself. He did not seem very well-versed in his own art. It beggars belief that not only he conceived such a stupid scheme, but that it actually worked for so long."

"So you think someone else might be more powerful, just by learning to use those abilities better?"

"Who knows? If it's really just a matter of state of mind, it's possible. We should test a bit with your pole, see how long or short you can get it, and how that relates to your expectations of how much you think a pole can be long or short while still counting as a pole."

"You could have done more experiments if you'd brought him with us."

Bulma laughed: "Goodness, no! I may have liked the idea of experimenting more, but I know better than carrying around a little creep like that right next to me, especially considering how hard his transformation skills would make it to keep him in check. Hell, he was kidnapping little girls and keeping them prisoner in his house! Even though it turned out he never hurt them and they were all quite fine, that twerp deserves all he's getting. He's lucky I was there to stop the villagers from outright lynching him, in fact."

Bulma went back to focusing on piloting the little airplane again, checking the route against a digital map to make sure of their direction. The landscape under them was flat and barren, just a vast dried-out desert with the occasional rock formation, and provided no points of reference. Goku stuck his face back against the cockpit window, looking below. It was the first time he experienced flight, without the notion having ever even crossed his mind before. He was starting to feel a little sorry that Muten's weird cloud did not manage to carry him.

"So, I was thinking," started Bulma "there are two Dragon Balls left. One of them is on Mount Frypan, and honestly, I've read up a bit on it, and it looks like a pretty awful place. The mountain is constantly on fire, and it's guarded by some local crazed warlord known as the Ox King. Everyone says he's really strong and I don't think we can just waltz in and get lucky like we did with Oolong."

"I will not fight to steal any Dragon Balls from a legitimate owner." said Goku, frowning.

"I did not mean to ask. But apparently this guy has attacked people who were just passing by on suspicion that they were thieves, so it's dangerous anyway, and you might have to fight in self-defence. Still, I'd like to plan a bit better, so maybe we should leave that one for last. I'm correcting the route and going towards the other one, which should not be anywhere special."

"That makes sense. Where are we going then?"

"First, a little town south of this desert to refuel and stock on some other necessities, then we stop for the night, and in the morning we travel five hundred more kilometres down, to the site of the other
ball." explained Bulma, pointing to the spots on the map "We should get there before noon tomorrow."

"This airplane thing is fast." commented Goku, looking down to the ground that was quickly zipping by.

"Yeah, you can say it out loud!" laughed the girl "Good thing too I thought of bringing this capsule along. Can you imagine traveling by car across that desert? It would have been a huge pain. And who knows what dangers lurk inside it, too!"

The hideout was quiet, except for the buzzing of the A/C keeping the desert heat outside. Curtains were drawn, keeping the air cool and in half darkness.

Long hair tossed all around, mouth half-open, gaze fixed on the ceiling, and a sword carelessly tossed next to him on the floor, the bandit lay spread out on a couch. He was not asleep, this was a state going beyond that. One of complete, utter, boredom-induced apathy.

"Puar," he asked "any prey in sight?"

"Nope!" said happily a squeaky voice from another room "Like yesterday. And the day before."

The voice paused a bit.

"And the last two months."

The bandit groaned loudly. A blue cat floated in from the door and hurried next to him.

"What's wrong, Yamcha?" he asked "You sound frustrated."

"I am frustrated, Puar, my loyal friend! The great Yamcha can not just wither away in this forgotten hole in the middle of nowhere. Action calls me! Adventure! Greatness!"

He jumped up from the coach, grabbed his sword and randomly swung it around a couple times. Puar floated back by a few steps for safety.

"I don't mind staying here." it said, its little eyes fixated on Yamcha "I get to spend time with you."

"I am happy you feel like that. But I'm sorry, this is not enough for me. I barely even make a living here! Whose plan was it to just wait in the middle of a freaking desert for someone to pass by and rob them, anyway?"

"Yours." pointed out Puar "You said at least out here you would not be likely to run into girls and be embarrassed by them."

"Well, I don't know what I was thinking then. I should overcome my fears, not succumb to them! I can conquer my shyness and make it big with my strength and skill. Pack up, Puar! We're leaving! We'll go make a living in the great urban jungle of West City."

"West City," said the cat, in a worried tone "There will be a lot of girls there."

"Yes, of course. That is the whole point. Grab your things. I will stuff everything useful into storage capsules and leave the rest of this junk here."

And so determined, Yamcha started going through the vast amount of used clothes, worn out
weapons, and looted goods strewn around the floor of the house and kept in chests and drawers, tossing some in a tall heap that constituted 'everything useful' and others in another, completely indistinguishable heap that constituted 'the rest of this junk'. During this process, Puar would only stare and float around in mild distress.

"A lot." he repeated feebly.

"I'll have a couple kilos of those cabbages. Put them in the refrigerating capsule, thanks. Also five kilos of potatoes."

"Sure thing, miss. That's a lot of greens you're buying."

"Well, I have a kid with me. Wouldn't want to stunt his growth."

"Oh, I see." the grocer smiled "Guess it will be hard to get him to eat 'em, right?"

"Wrong. Not only he gobbles them down happily, you wouldn't believe how much he bothers me about healthy eating. His grandpa apparently taught him how a martial artist takes care of his body like a temple, and keeps all his nutrients balanced. He's dragging me down this hole by nagging me so much, lunch and dinner."

Bulma sighed.

"I miss fries." she concluded, longingly.

The grocer laughed.

"Well, if you want to indulge into sin," he said, lowering his voice "I believe I have some bags of crisps for sale."

"Yes, please!" exclaimed the girl "Give me twenty of those."

They kept chatting about as she loaded the provisions. She would drag out one of her storage capsules, make it puff out into a big box to stuff with food, then re-encapsulate it and label it with a marker to remember what contained what. Meanwhile, the grocer was keeping a meticulous bill, and promising generous bulk discounts if she bought just some more. At this rate, he might have to close down shop for the next two days waiting for restocks, as he basically would have nothing left to sell. Not that he'd complain about that.

Bulma went through a shopping list, striking out things as they got loaded.

"Right," she asked "next I'd like some carrots."

The man stopped dead in his tracks and gave her a rather gloomy look.

"We don't sell carrots here." he said, gravely.

"I'm sorry, are you giving me the you-outsiders-should-not-get-involved-in-the-business-of-our-town look over freaking root vegetables?" said Bulma in disbelief.

The man shook his head: "If it's root vegetables you're interested in, we've got onions, turnips, burdocks and parsnips. Not carrots."

"Well, that's rich. I'm going to bring my very abundant money somewhere else I suppose! What kind
of grocery store does not stock on carrots?"

"You won't find them anywhere else. No matter how much you're willing to pay. In this town, we
don't like carrots."

The curtain behind them tingled, and a breeze entered in the shop.

"Is that so?" asked Bulma, defiantly, her hands on her hips "And for what incredibly stupid reason
would that be?"

The grocer did not answer. All colour faded from his face. Bulma heard a click behind her, and the
cold metallic circle of a gun tip pressing against her back.

"Because we're the ones running the carrot racket here, rich girl." said a sneering voice "Now come
out slowly, hands high, and don't try anything funny."

In the middle of the road, in front of the grocery store, ignoring the odd look from the occasional
passer by, Goku was practicing one of his favourite exercises, debate pushups. Debate pushups, seen
from the outside, were basically the same as regular pushups. The only difference was that, during
each series of ten, Goku would argue internally in favour of one side of a given argument, and then
he would switch sides and play devil's advocate for the next ten, and so on. It was good training for
both body and mind, and it would often help him gain insight in his own opinions and reasons to
hold them. Today, his topic of choice was the validity of subjective experience in grasping the
essence of objective reality, and whether such a reality existed at all - a topic on which Bulma's ideas
about the scientific method, if a bit rough around the edges due to her pragmatic nature, gave him a
lot new material to chew on. He had just begun to have fun exploring the ramifications of the
concept of falsifiability when he realised something was wrong. Bulma was coming out of the shop,
but she wasn't alone. Two men and a, well, a giant rabbit, were right behind her. The giant rabbit
wore sunglasses. One of the men was holding what he had learned to recognise as a gun against
Bulma's back.

"Goku!" she called "Don't you think you could have done something when you saw two men with
guns enter the shop?"

"What?" he asked "You had a gun too when we first met. Isn't that normal?"

"NO!"

"Ok, less chatting with your friend." ordered brusquely the bandit keeping her hostage "So, what do
we do with her, boss?"

"Well, she claimed to be very rich." said the rabbit "Let's go through her stuff to find anything of
value, and then ask her who is her family. Then we will demand a ransom."

"Ha! I don't think my parents even know what cash is." said Bulma, sarcastic "So I really hope
you're willing to accept credit cards."

The rabbit seemed more amused than annoyed. He circled around the girl, then looked her up into
her eyes.

"How very brave, girl." he said "I wonder if you realise your own situation. You don't act like
someone with a gun to their back."
"I have my reasons. Do you see my friend? The kid in the blue gi with the monkey tail?"

"I see him," confirmed the rabbit, sounding bored "what of it?"

"See, I can guarantee you that in a few seconds he will intervene, and he will either kick your ass to the Moon and back, or talk you into thinking everything you've ever believed is wrong. Not sure which one is worse yet."

"Ha! Kick my ass!" the rabbit laughed. He seemed to find this funny. His henchmen, not so much, but after an appropriately encouraging glance they joined in the fun too.

"Honey, you don't get it. Nobody can 'kick my ass'." he patiently explained once the hilarity died down "As it happens, I possess a very special power. A magical ability bestowed upon me by fate, to defeat my enemies, and strike fear in their hearts!"

The explanation was getting heated up. The rabbit rose a fist to the sky, triumphant.

"For you see! I have been blessed by the most mystical gift of the rabbit God! The ultimate leporine enchantment! Know and fear, for everyone who happens to touch my body will be turned INTO A CARROT!"

"How do you mate, then?" asked Goku, out of the blue.

The rabbit and his gang stood still, completely muted. Bulma, instead, started laughing loudly.

"I'm... sorry. I don't think I've heard you right?" said the rabbit.

"How do you mate? I've seen rabbits in the woods and they definitely touch each other. Now, I realise that you are bigger, but I was just wondering if..."

"ENOUGH!" screamed the rabbit, stomping his foot on the ground. Goku stopped, clearly still unsure of what had he said that was so wrong. Bulma kept laughing, and laughing, so much she was basically bent over herself. The goons guarding her didn't seem too worried, and in fact were sort of chuckling themselves.

"STOP LAUGHING!" ordered the boss, walking to her.

"I'm sorry!" she said, almost crying "I can't! Give me a second and..."

"I SAID STOP LAUGHING YOU BITCH!"

There was a slapping sound, and suddenly there was silence. Goku could not believe Bulma would just calm down so quickly. He looked and realised she wasn't there any more. He blinked, did a double take. Bulma was not there.

Firmly clasped in the boss rabbit's hand was a carrot.

"That's better." he sneered "Now that's a good girl."

"Turn her back." asked Goku, calmly.

He walked towards the group of the three bandits, slowly, and finally stopped while still keeping some distance. He grabbed his pole and unsheathed it, then held it in front of his body, slightly reclined, in a defensive position. His mind was racing, flooded with adrenaline and worry. Was Bulma still conscious? Was she trapped in the carrot? Or was she rather effectively dead? Would she be Bulma again once the carrot was turned back? How could one even be said to be the same after
their body was transformed into a carrot and then back?

What would happen if the carrot was bitten or damaged in any way?

"Don't be ridiculous." said the rabbit "You're just a kid, and there's three of us, and we have guns. Boys, shoot him dead!"

The bandits rose their guns and pointed them at Goku, except Goku was not there any more. He was already halfway to the first bandit when they finally started firing, panicking. He timed his steps so that he could push on his right leg at the best moment and jump to narrowly dodge the bullet shower. He could see them, the little pointy bits of metal flying through the air - they would probably pack a punch, but they were slow. Compared to his sight, at least.

He realised one moment later he had missed some of the second bandit's bullets, falling right into his blind spot. He was mid air, and there was no time to land again. He quickly whirled his arm and stick, gaining momentum to spin away from the trajectory of two of them. The third could not be avoided, so he took it with his arm, focusing on stiffening his muscle as much as possible. When it hit, it hurt like hell, but he was not wounded - rather, the bullet bounced off, and with the spin of the arm, its trajectory was aimed straight at the first bandit's leg. When it hit, and he screamed in pain, Goku was already upon him.

At this point he was not worrying about anything - he was pure instinct again. The bandit was falling, and Goku put his body between himself and the other enemy, so that he would create an opening. The other hesitated an instant, shifting the gun from left to right, expecting the kid to appear from either side. Instead, Goku jumped on top of the falling body, and came upon the second bandit from above. He was too slow to even raise the gun before Goku was already upon him. An axe kick straight to his head finished the affair. In less than five seconds from when the order was given, the rabbit's henchmen were laying on the ground, bleeding or unconscious, and Goku was neither shot, nor dead.

"Turn her back, now." he repeated.

"Don't dream it, kid!" screamed the rabbit. Now he was definitely scared, and as a result clenched the Bulma-carrot even tighter in his hand "This is my ticket out of here after all. Let me go, or I will eat her!"

"If I let you go, I will never see either you or her again." said Goku, calmly "Turn her back."

And he pointed his pole at him, holding it with a straight arm.

Theory: magic is a state of mind shaping reality. Its persistence is dependent on that state of mind.

"You have no choice!" the rabbit now was shrieking, as he hurriedly walked, stumbled backwards, away from the kid "Kill me, and she'll never turn back!"

Prediction: if the consciousness holding the state of mind that sustains the magic ceases to exist in this plane of reality, the effect will fade.

"That's a lie." said Goku, and he imagined his stick extending quickly right to the length necessary to pierce through the rabbit's eye socket and plunge straight into his brain, and it instantly was so.

When Bulma came to her senses, her first feeling was one of warm wetness on her fingers. She immediately worried it was her blood; but quickly she realised it was actually someone else's.
Specifically, that of the rabbit boss, whose corpse was strewn next to her. The blood was pouring out of its broken skull.

She got up, shaken. Her legs felt weak. She looked for Goku, and sure enough, there he was, standing a few meters from her, frozen, and the tip of his stick red and dripping. She understood what happened, and walked to him.

"Hey." she called out "You all right?"

"I killed him." stated Goku, matter-of-factly. His voice was cold and trembled a bit "I thought it was the safest way to get you back at the moment. But I was wrong. I thought about it, there were a lot of ways in which I could have been wrong, and you would have remained a carrot forever, I took a tremendous risk. But it did not matter at that moment. I killed him because I wanted to kill him."

She put a hand on his back.

"Goku," said Bulma "right now I'm a bit too shocked to think about this too hard. We will have time later. But let me tell you, I'm not such a saint I would cry over the death of some jerk who wanted to kidnap me and turned me into a carrot, when all you wanted to do was protect me. So, if that makes you feel better: thank you. Really."

"The only person I killed before him" he continued, without looking her in the eyes "was my grandpa."

Bulma did not know how to respond to this. She immediately felt like drawing back from him, but did not do it. She hoped he didn't even notice the intent - it was clearly not what he needed right now.

"There is no other explanation. Grandpa had told me that there was a big monster who rampaged on the nights of full moon. But I never saw it - every time I would see the damage it was some night when I did not remember anything, not even going to sleep. One day he told me, and he was bruised, and bleeding, but he said he was fine, to just never go out with the full moon, because it was dangerous."

Goku started shaking. He had tears in his eyes.

"But one night, I went out anyway, because I thought, I thought I wanted to see it. And then I don't remember anything. And the next day, he was dead, squashed by a giant foot. Except I feel like I do remember something. I have dreams about it. I remember being angry, and huge, and powerful, and, and his bones, under my foot, cracking..."

"Hey, it's alright. It's alright."

Bulma got down on the ground and hugged him. It was not really alright - she did not know if she should feel terrified of this little boy who could squish her skull with one hand and apparently was a werewolf or something worse. It seemed like it would have been the sensible thing. But what the heck, had she been sensible, she would not have gone on this trip to begin with. And this boy had just saved her life.

"It's like there's something in me that is, just, always angry." said Goku, anguished "That wants to kill everyone. And usually I control it and almost forget it exists, but when I fight, it just, it just pours out. And if you're right, and magic depends on the state of mind, then it can't be the moon that transforms me into that thing that killed my grandpa. It must be me. My mind, that really wants to be that thing, big and savage, and destroy the entire world."
"Goku, you're being unreasonable!" snapped Bulma "It does not work like that. Mine was just a theory. Think about it for a moment. Maybe my theory is simply wrong. Maybe whatever triggers this transformation is not magic at all, and there is something else at play. And maybe whatever determines that form is just an unconscious, deeper, more animalistic part of your mind, but we all have one. Well, I must teach you evolution one day or another, but basically, we are all related to other beasts after all."

She tapped his forehead with her index finger.

"But the part that really matters is here, country boy. Prefrontal cortex, and all the works. Everything in your brain that thinks and analyses and reflects on itself. And yours works brilliantly. So don't lose faith in it. Whatever the other parts of you want, this is the one that holds the reins, as your grandpa taught you. This is what makes you human."

Goku's expression relaxed into a neutral one as his mind slid into ruminating about this.

"I understand your intent," he said "but really, you mean that it is what makes me capable of moral judgement. Unless you would suggest that among the many sentient creatures who possess consciousness and speech on this planet only humans have such an ability, which would strike me as quite speciesist. And in fact, I am not entirely sure I am fully human myself."

"And here we go! See, you've gone back to being your regular self. But yes, of course you're right. Like always. And anyway... you only have a monkey tail. I was just nearly killed by a giant rabbit who could transform people into carrots. At this point, by my standards, you're human enough."

This actually elicited a small laugh from Goku - the first one Bulma had ever seen. She kept hugging him and patting his back, and they stayed for a while there, sitting in the middle of a road, with the brained corpse of a giant rabbit next to them, as the people of the town started peering out of their houses again and begun passing the news that the bandit threat was finally over.

"Tonight's a full moon though," finally said Bulma, after a long silence "So you're definitely sleeping inside."

That evening they erected their usual capsule house just at the outskirts of the town - despite repeated offers from some of the best hotels to host them as thanks for getting rid the area of the formerly infamous Rabbit Gang. Part of it was that Goku would have probably felt even worse than he already did, being rewarded for killing someone. But it was also that, given what she'd just learned, Bulma felt safer keeping Goku in a more controlled environment. There was a room inside the house that had no windows - it was meant as a storage space, but they emptied it and Goku agreed it was best if he spent that night in there, so that no light from the Moon could reach him. The boy went to bed early; Bulma instead stayed up until late. She was too excited and shaken by the whole day to sleep easily anyway, so she decided to spend the time researching the location of the Dragon Ball they were going after now. All maps only showed another half-desert area where the radar pointed, and information about local fauna and criminal activity suggested it was not especially dangerous. However, when she checked the area with satellite imagery, she frowned upon discovering that, approximately at those coordinates, there was a castle.

So the Dragon Ball was likely to be in someone's hands.

It could still be bought or earned somehow, so this was not necessarily reason for despair, but Bulma had a nagging worry. She decided to look a bit deeper into the data at her disposal. Tracking back the owner of the castle seemed impossible - she could find no records of its existence until a few
years ago, and even those were nebulous at best. Then she connected the Dragon Radar to her laptop with a cable. While the radar's display could only plot the present location of the Dragon Balls, its memory still held historical data from the last six months, recorded at a frequency of once per minute. Bulma loaded the data in a visualisation program, and started plotting the position of the Dragon Ball against time, overlapped on a map of the area.

It was constant until a while back. Before that, however, it had moved. In a perfect straight line, as if it was carried by airplane. And before that, it had travelled in an irregular fashion - that followed perfectly the road network.

Bulma checked the dates.

The last time this Dragon Ball had moved by car was on the same day in which she got her second one, two days before meeting Goku. It was then that it had taken a quick trip via airplane and then had been holed up in the castle and left there, obviously to look more inconspicuous.

"Shit." muttered Bulma, biting her thumb.

Someone else was looking for the Dragon Balls, and they had a radar too.

Chapter End Notes

That's chapter 3 over! This was the longest one yet. It's also the one that marks the beginning of some major divergences from the original story, with multiple characters going in drastically different directions (as a way of reassurance: don't worry, this is not the last we see of the great Yamcha). The ending is also somewhat darker, which hopefully will give you a better sense of the kind of mood I'm striving for - generally comedic, but not without its serious moments. Thanks for reading!
The dunce and future king

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the idea and characters of Dragon Ball are owned by Akira Toriyama. This is a simple non-profit fan parody.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 4 - The dunce and future king

The woman's fingers moved nimbly on the metallic keypad, rapidly pressing a five digits code. The keypad emitted an electronic buzz so cacophonous, it was like the security system itself was looking down in spite at the fleshy human who dared get the password wrong.

The woman sighed, and checked her watch. It was past midnight, barely. She typed a different code, and this time there was a pleasant blip, and the door happily slid open. She entered the vast throne room, walking speedily but with some care, because the stone tiles floor was somewhat uneven and the lighting was poor, especially there at the back. This was, of course, because His Majesty thought that flaming torches made for a far more dramatic source of light than electric lamps.

"Your Majesty, Lord Pilaf," the woman saluted, "reporting. I apologise for the mishap with the access code."

"At ease, Mai." Pilaf was sitting on the throne in formal attire, blue-and-red striped cap and all. "We were just discussing the new security measures with Shu, here."

Shu was, of course, the anthropomorphic dog in a ninja suit that stood next to the throne. He was fidgeting nervously with his paws, and shifting from one foot to the other, a bit uncomfortable.

"Yes, Lord Pilaf," he said "as I was saying, I think changing all the passwords daily is the best we can do if we want to reinforce security. Weekly would have been fine in normal circumstances, but well, with our rivals gathering more and more Dragon Balls by the day, it seems sensible to just make sure."

Mai raised an eyebrow.

"Really, Shu? Frankly, I felt it was already enough as it was. Now we have five different passwords - two for the residence wings, one for the throne room, one for the machine floor, and one for the underground treasure room - and I have to learn new ones every day. It kind of defeats the purpose if the turnover is so quick we need to write them down on paper to remember them."

"You could do as we do, Mai," intervened Pilaf, with a self-satisfied smile "and write them down on the palm of your hand instead."

Shu took a positively horrified expression, and Mai sent him an eloquent look, but neither of them commented this out loud.

"Anyway," said Mai "I feel like we are focusing way too much on the defensive here. What good is
a daily password, instead of a weekly one, if we never move to strike our enemies? They have the initiative, and are clearly making use of it. Tomorrow they could just come smashing through the walls of our castle, or hack into our security systems, or who knows what else. We can't just stand waiting. We need to act."

She paused for a second.

"Your Majesty," she added, with a small bow.

Pilaf nodded, making a display of having followed Mai's arguments very carefully.

"You are right, Mai, of course, and we greatly value your advice. We called this meeting exactly to discuss this matter. Shu, could you give us the situation report?"

"Uhm, sure, Lord Pilaf," said Shu "the radar currently shows only, uhm, three bright spots on the map. One corresponds to our Dragon Ball, sitting in the treasure room. Another is located on Mount Frypan, probably inside the infamous Ox King's castle. Finally, the third spot is approximately 500 km to the north of here. It stands still at night and at day it's moving, and has been for quite some time, steadily, towards, well, us."

"So they now have five Dragon Balls." Mai frowned. "Not bad considering that we're the ones who should have a castle, lots of military hardware, and a radar."

"Well, they obviously have a radar too, and probably, uhm, better than ours. Our resolution is only five meters, so we can't really distinguish their Balls, they keep them all together in some container. I also can't say anything sure about their weapons, but they seem to at least have a lot of different vehicles. They've been moving by road and air. Also they stop every night in a different place, so they have some kind of portable base."

"Mobile and always on the offensive. They know what they're doing. Lord Pilaf, may I ask your permission to act?"

Pilaf leaned forward, curious. "What do you have in mind, Mai?"

"A pre-emptive strike. At their current distance, if I take a plane, I can reach them before dawn. I don't expect them to have strong defences, considering their mobility. I'll scout their base and if the situation allows for it, I will break in and steal the Dragon Balls."

"Mai," Pilaf's expression darkened, "we don't do that."

The woman blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"We don't use that word. A king does not steal from his subjects."

"I apologise, Your Majesty," she immediately corrected herself "I will confiscate the Dragon Balls, for the greater glory of your kingdom."

"That's better. However, Mai, you are loyal but rash. We do not believe we should spring into hostile action so quickly."

"We don't know how dangerous they are." said Shu.

"That is true, Shu, but we were thinking of something else. It would be a proper display of our magnanimity as a sovereign, if we were to offer these misguided subjects of ours a chance to negotiate, see the errors of their ways, and contribute willingly to the reign of their one true King. It
is after all possible - if unlikely - that news of our Majesty have not reached them yet."

"Your Majesty," said Mai, with all the calm she could muster, "I strongly advise against that."

"Your advice has been noted. But our decision is final. Shu, arrange for an invitation to be sent to the current location of the five Dragon Balls. They are to come here for a dinner and an audience with us tomorrow, so that their fealty may be discussed."

"As you command." The dog bowed quickly. "I just have put together a new drone that I wanted to test on the field."

And he bolted away.

Mai kneeled and kept her head low.

"I will follow your orders," she said "but I feel I can not guarantee our safety if we reveal to our enemy so many of our secrets, and give them access to our base of operation."

"Mai, Mai, dear Mai. This is much simpler than you are making it to be. We have our security systems, we will be playing in our home field. There are no risks for us."

Pilaf rose from the throne and advanced to her, smiling. He probably wanted to make it a slow, solemn walk, but his legs were too short and the steps in front of the throne way too tall for that to work properly.

"They will see the light. And if not, they will either have to leave the Dragon Balls unguarded in their current base, or bring them here. And in either case, you will have our permission to confiscate them - as well as to punish their felony - however you see fit."

Mai smiled.

"As you order, Your Majesty."

When Goku woke up, at dawn, and was readying himself to go do his morning training routine, he found Bulma awake in the kitchen, at the table, busy with tools, wires, circuit boards, and the remains of what must have been one of the house's appliances.

"Good morning, Bulma," greeted her Goku "you woke up early."

Bulma lifted her head.

"No, I'm going to bed late," she said, and dove back into the bundle of cables she was trying to untangle.

The boy peered curiously at the messy tangle of electronics that she was working on. He thought he recognised one discarded piece, a rectangular door of sorts with a thick glass.

"Was that the thing you always use to cook dinner?" he asked. "The wavy oven?"

"Microwave oven, yes. This is both of them, in fact. I had a spare."

A screw was forced and broken with a hammer's head. The splinters flew towards Goku, who nudged his head in reflex to dodge them.
"I'm glad you decided to get rid of it," approved the boy, "all those meals in boxes that you kept making with it did not look very healthy. I'll be happy to share my steamed vegetables and roasted meat with you."

"That is definitely not why I did it," Bulma said with a sigh, "but well, things happened, and I needed the pieces to make some other things."

"Oh? Why? What happened?"

"Let's see... do you know what electromagnetic waves are?"

"No. But I think you mentioned that word when you explained how you could find the Dragon Balls."

"Right. Ok, so, think of electromagnetic waves a bit like the waves you see on the surface of a lake. Except they're invisible and can travel everywhere, because the lake is everywhere."

"Wait," Goku frowned "if the lake is everywhere, isn't that almost the same as saying that there is no lake at all?"

"Whatever floats your boat. It's just a metaphor anyway. Electromagnetic waves are of different types, like radio waves, or light..."

"You said they were invisible," objected Goku "but I can see light. And it does not look like a wave."

"Argh! Ok, so they're all invisible except light, and with light you can't see it's a wave because, well you don't really see light, you see using light. No matter. These waves can pass right through some types of matter, or hit it and push it..."

"Like a punch?" suggested Goku.

"...or just heat it up..."

"Like a series of back-and-forth slaps!" he suggested again, happy that he was finally getting the hang of this.

"...yes, you could say so. You give me a renewed appreciation for how much physics is involved in beating people up. Microwaves do the latter, to water, specifically. So that's what the oven does, it uses microwaves to make the water inside food heat up and cook it, producing them with a resonant cavity, and keeping them confined with a metallic mesh cage, so that they don't get out."

She threw a glance at the mangled remains of the appliance, strewn all over the table.

"Well, that's what it did, at least."

"That is all very interesting," said Goku, "but I still don't get what happened. You are in a bit of a frenzy."

"Oh, right. That. Let me have a coffee first."

A few minutes passed while Bulma trafficked with a kettle and poured herself a long cup of very dark coffee. She considered offering some to Goku too but the thought of an hyperintelligent monkey boy with super strength high on caffeine worried her a bit. Finally she sat down with her smoking mug.
"Right," she said "so, as it happens, yesterday I checked a bit of past data, and it seems someone else is looking for the Dragon Balls, with a radar like mine."

A moment of silence.

"Okay, and?" asked Goku.

"That's it. You don't see a problem with it?"

Goku thought for a bit.

"Well, no," he answered in the end "Two groups will be faster in finding all of them than one. And even if they don't want to give theirs to you, you can give ours to them, on condition that they return them to us if they don't work. After all the main thing you want is to see if they work, right?"

"True, my own wish is... more of a side bonus," admitted Bulma, "but don't you see the problem with letting someone else use the Dragon Balls? What if they wish to conquer the world? What if they wish to become invincible, and then conquer the world?"

"True, that would be a bad thing. But how would they know that you don't want to do that instead?"

"Because if I wanted to, I would do it anyway without magical aid. Look, I just don't trust these people! Who knows what passes through the head of some rich egomaniac who's willing to dump vast amounts of their money and time in a wild goose chase after seven legendary magical artifacts?"

Goku stared at her in silence.

"What?" blurted out Bulma.

"Honestly, I think you may be overreacting." he said. "I can not discard the possibility that you are right, of course. But if you are planning to do something that's not ethical...

"Yeah, I know. I'm not a thief." said the girl, with a gesture of dismissal. "But I also think that you're being way too optimistic. Let's put it this way - we will try to investigate these people's motives. Possibly to meet them. And if they turn out to be after world domination, or something like that, then...?"

"Then I can agree to help you take their Dragon Balls out of their hands," agreed Goku, "on one condition."

"What condition?"

"You tell me what you would wish for. I still don't know and I would not want it to be something even worse."

"Seriously! Who do you take me for?"

Bulma was actually rather offended at this point, but the kid did not look too fazed.

"I'm sorry, I did not mean to suggest anything too bad. I trust you not to be wishing for anything outright evil. But I also can not be sure that I would agree with your wish, or that it would not have disastrous unintended consequences. If I am to compare it to someone else's..."

"Fine. I'll tell you." sighed Bulma. "Promise not to laugh."

Deep breath.
"I am going to ask for a boyfriend."

There was a long pause of silence, as Bulma tried to look just about anywhere else than at Goku, and he stood a bit perplexed.

"A boy friend? I mean, I thought I was..." he started.

"Not that!" the other interrupted him. "Yes, I mean, you are a boy, and you are sort of a friend at this point. But that's not what that word means. A boyfriend is more like someone you are together for... you know..."

"Oh! Mating?" suggested Goku, in a flash of insight.

"Well, not right away, thank you very much!" snapped back Bulma.

"But if you ask the dragon for a person, won't he just create one? Is that okay with you?"

"I thought about that, you know. I'm going to be very specific. He only has to make me meet someone who already exists, not create them."

"Fair enough. Well, that sounds pretty innocuous, I guess. Though if you ask me, I would say with such a great power at your disposal, you would have a moral obligation to use it for something more worthwhile..."

"Yes, well, we don't even know for sure if it's a great power at all. So perhaps better not to raise our hopes up, or find out some horrible side effects after we asked it to destroy hunger and illness forever, yes?" Bulma was annoyed and her cheeks slightly flushed. "Now that you made me tell you my intentions, and have dismissed them as innocuous, we can focus back on the main issue. How do we find out what these people want?"

Goku shrugged.

"We ask?"

"Ah-ha, very funny. It's not like they will suddenly come to our doors and just tell us where and when to meet them."

"Attention! Inhabitants of this base!"

The recorded voice came from outside. It was loud but the audio was crackling. Goku and Bulma exchanged a quick look, then ran outside, to find a drone with a big speaker hanging from its bottom floating just in front of their temporary house.

"This is an emissary of King Pilaf the Great, First of His Name, Master of the One Star Dragon Ball, speaking to you. We are aware that you are in possession of a great deal of the remaining Dragon Balls. The King summons you at his castle for a dinner tonight, so that you can share in his vision, and offer in due tribute the Dragon Balls already in your possession, to help it come to fruition. You are to make every effort to be present. Failure to attend would greatly displease His Majesty, King Pilaf."

And having delivered its speech, the drone speedily hovered away.

"Well," Bulma blinked a couple of times, still stunned "that happened, I guess."

"We are going, right?" asked Goku.
"Sure. Let me just finish the work I was doing before you got up, and then we'll be ready to go..."

The castle was a massive construction with a square central body, a dome above it, and cylindrical towers all around. For such a huge building, it also felt eerily quiet. No signs of bustling activity, guards, servants, or any such things. It looked rather incongruous, slapped in the middle of an empty land, with no roads leading to it, no city around it, and basically looking empty. It was almost as if it had been materialised from a capsule the way their house was every night, thought Bulma, except no capsule could carry something this big. The house was already skirting the mass limit, something of this size was out of the question.

She and Goku walked up to the front door. Bulma carried only her usual side bag she used for her capsules and other necessities; the boy, on the other hand, had a large sack thrown across his shoulder. The door was a wooden portal so huge no single person could have pushed it open (or at least, no one who wasn't as ludicrously strong as Goku). Two heavy door knockers hung from it. She wondered how they could possibly be heard in such a huge, empty building but still tried using one. Though she tried to look casual while doing it, even the brass loop was hard to lift, and she had to make some serious effort. When it hit, it rung with a resounding metallic note - and an electric buzz. Apparently knocking also closed a circuit, so this was just a very fancy and dramatic doorbell.

The door opened on its own, turned around by invisible engines, probably embedded in its own bulk. Bulma had to take note of the ingenuity that went into designing this place, but couldn't help but chuckle at the thought of who would even get an architect to build something this ridiculously cheesy. The picture didn't improve as they walked inside, in a dark corridor lit only by seemingly wooden torches (that on closer inspection were in fact made of some other fire resistant material, while the flame was fed by gaseous fuel that exuded from its porous surface), and covered in tiles that she immediately recognised as triggers, slightly disjointed from the rest of the floor. They were probably deactivated since the inhabitants were expecting guests, but she could hardly suppress the temptation to push one on purpose, just to see if a rolling boulder or some equally silly trap would pop out from somewhere.

"I said rich egomaniac, remember?" she whispered to Goku "If you still want to hold onto the hope that these are sane people with honest intentions, I'm taking bets."

Goku frowned and said nothing. Obviously, he was torn between his belief that you shouldn't let first impressions deceive you, and the distinct feeling that sometimes however certain first impressions are all that it takes. You can only do so much to make your house look totally like an evil lair before that actually says something about you. Bulma chuckled and tried to keep in mind every turn and twist in the corridors, and build a mental map of the place. She was pretty sure they were still in the main core of the building, but vast areas of it seemed unused, and there were no doors, so either those were accessible from other paths, or the castle was just big for the sake of looking imposing.

Finally, they reached a door, marking the end of the corridor. Here they met the first people they'd seen yet - a woman and a dog, standing in front of the entrance, as guards, on either side.

"Shu," said the woman, "inform His Majesty that our guests have arrived."

"Going now!" the dog keyed in a passcode quickly, then pushed the door open, just enough to slip inside, without letting Bulma catch a glimpse of the room.

The woman turned around to address the other two. "I apologise for the wait. His Majesty will receive you in a moment. I am Mai, Head of the Royal Guard."
"Don't worry, I understand." said Bulma, unfazed. "I am Bulma, and this here is Goku."

Mai eyed the kid and greeted both with a small bow, but Bulma couldn't help notice that her eyes wandered for an instant to the sack that Goku was carrying, through which a number of bumpy spherical shapes could be spotted. Soon after, the door opened, and after exchanging a few words with Mai, Shu announced the guests. They all walked inside. The front of the room was dark, and in the back they could see a lighted table, with a throne at its head. On the throne, Bulma saw someone sitting, and beckoning to them with a gesture. A small, impish, blue-skinned creature in ridiculous circus-like clothes.

King Pilaf.

"Welcome, our honoured guests!" he waved his hands in a grand welcoming gesture. "We are pleased to have you tonight at our table. Sit, and let us dine and discuss of your allegiances."

"Goku," whispered Bulma, kneeling next to him while pretending to adjust his clothes so that he appeared a bit more presentable, "I think it's better if you let me do the talking here. This guy seems hung up on etiquette and we don't want you to mess our relationship up from the get go."

"What's etiquette?" asked Goku.

"Exactly. Keep your mouth shut and let me handle this."

"Sit, then! Mai, please serve the wine. Shu, bring something to whet our appetite. Then you can join us at the table."

The two acknowledged the orders with a quick bow and vanished in the dark. Bulma considered sitting at the end of the table opposite to Pilaf's throne, but then, seeing its ridiculous length, opted for practicality over presentation and picked a place on the side as close to their host as possible. Goku sat in front of her, dutifully silent, as it was ordered of him. He obviously did not know many of the items in front of him. Bulma had barely managed to teach him how to use anything else than chopsticks. Here there was a vast assortment of cutlery for various purposes, as well as multiple glasses. One moment later, Mai came back with a bottle of wine, and poured some to Pilaf, herself and Shu. She dutifully skipped Goku, who definitely looked too young to drink, but hesitated a bit in front of Bulma, no doubt wondering about her age.

"Just a bit, thanks," she said, smiling with the confidence of a girl who's totally not just sixteen years old.

Mai obliged, and then sat down next to Goku. A quick taste revealed that the lie wasn't really worth it. Obviously all the budget here had gone in building the castle.

"So," King Pilaf was sipping his wine, his eyes half closed in delight, "we have heard your names, but we would like you to hear your own introduction. Who comes today before our presence?"

"We will be glad to oblige." Bulma put her glass down. "This boy is called Son Goku. And I am Bulma Briefs, of the Briefs family, from West City."

Pilaf frowned. "Is that a name we've heard?"

"Most likely, your Majesty." she smiled. "My family owns Capsule Corporation, the largest industrial complex in the world."

"OH MY GOD! YOU ARE THE DAUGHTER OF DR. BRIEFS?" Shu dropped some of the dishes he was bringing to the table, his eyes sparkling with excitement. This earned him a stern look
from Pilaf. He mumbled some excuses, bowed down as low as he could, pulled out a rag and started cleaning up.

"Yes, that is quite impressive." Pilaf kept fiddling with his glass, flaunting a somewhat bored expression. "That person right there, who's badly mopping the floor and will now go get us more food after the one he wasted is Shu. He's our chief engineer, in charge of running all the machinery of this castle and keeping our gear in shape."

"Oh, a colleague then." Bulma's approving smile almost gave Shu a heart attack. 

"That right there instead is Mai, whom you've already met. She's my head of security. She has a lot of first hand military and combat experience, both with and without weapons, dozens of deployments, and five years as an officer in the Re..."

Mai loudly cleared her throat. Pilaf sort of awkwardly ended the sentence there, and continued as if nothing happened.

"And we are King Pilaf, last scion of the Rice dynasty. As you may see, our circumstances at the moment prevent us from appearing before you in the full majesty of our position, but that is soon to be... subject to change."

"With the help of the Dragon Balls, of course." said Bulma.

"Of course."

She winked so that only Goku would see her, but he didn't even flinch. Being proven right was no fun with this boy, decided Bulma. She needed to do something about that if they were to spend more time together.

"Rice dynasty," Bulma took on a thoughtful expression, "I seem to remember it dates back to something like 300 years ago."

"Yes!" Pilaf jumped up from his chair, pointing a finger at Bulma "Finally, someone who appreciates the beauty and value of historical knowledge. You are right, we were unjustly dethroned three centuries ago. Since then, the current ruling Corgi dynasty has erased any trace of our glorious past."

Bulma tapped a finger on the table. "But if I don't remember wrong, there were some shadows hanging over that episode. This was at the time of the Demon King War, when the legendary Piccolo launched his invasion of the world. Frankly I thought that story to be more myth than reality, but nowadays I have to re-evaluate a lot my previous beliefs. It was him who killed the last Rice king. When he was defeated, however, the reign was not restored to the crown prince, due to the... questionable loyalty to the people displayed by his father. They said, and I'm quoting by memory, that the king bowed before Piccolo; that he offered the throne and all of the treasury in exchange for his own life; and that he even suggested he could offer him in sacrifice the poor innocent orphans of the Royal Children's Home."

Hearing these words, Pilaf became increasingly red in the face (which, mixing with his natural skin colour, really made him purple); until Mai slammed a hand on the table, staring at Bulma with ice cold eyes. "Those are merely lies and slander, spread by the enemies of the King to legitimize the usurper they put in his place."

"You tell her, Mai." Pilaf sat down, still agitated "Our independent historical research has shown all those stories to be fabrications. For example, the orphans were actually pretty awful people."

"Naturally." said Bulma, smiling. "I did not mean to suggest anything else."
After the previous mishap, the first dishes were finally served. Shu sat down eagerly after putting everything on the table, and managed to find himself next to Bulma. He looked to his side more than he did at his food, shifting around restless on his seat, but a quick sour glance from Pilaf put an end to that.

Everyone started eating, except for Goku. Bulma looked across the table to see him firmly resolved in keeping to his instructions not to open his mouth to the letter. When their eyes crossed, he nodded towards the food asking for permission, and Bulma gave it with a gesture and a chuckle. He finally started digging in - good thing too, because she had noticed Pilaf looking slightly displeased at seeing the food served at his court be so scorned.

The conversation started meandering, as both Pilaf and Bulma skirted around the obvious elephant in the room - or rather, the huge sack that Goku kept next to him, the one that blatantly contained five spherical objects of shape and size matching the Dragon Balls. There was some exchange of pleasantries, and Shu got his chance to discuss a bit of his work with Bulma, right before being ordered to shut up about what apparently was supposed to be top secret research. Mai was not very talkative, and Goku obediently did not say a word throughout the dinner, and merely systematically munched through the dishes that were served. His variety of expressions during the process was an endless source of amusement for Bulma - as he shifted from diffidence, and even disdain, towards something that looked new or unhealthy, to complete amazement and delight at discovering flavours he had never tasted before; and, to be fair, that was probably the only circumstance in which anyone would have had such an enthusiastic reaction to Shu's cooking. To have your engineer be also your chef said a lot on King Pilaf's personnel shortages. In fact, hard as it was to believe, Bulma was growing more and more convinced that the entire enterprise was ran merely by these three people, which was beyond ridiculous for a conspiracy aiming at a coup against the throne. Well, with the Dragon Balls, less so, unfortunately. All the more reason to do everything in her power to stop these loons from actually getting them. And of course, to do everything to get their Dragon Ball in turn - all in the best interest of the world, naturally. Hopefully, once they got a chance to talk it out, Goku would agree with this.

"Time for the dessert!" Pilaf clapped to draw attention to himself "Which will hopefully make what we need to talk about all the sweeter."

Shu trotted back into the kitchen and emerged with a tray carrying several crystal cups with some kind of fruit parfait, and a bucket full of coconuts. Apparently, the dessert was supposed to be completed when the coconuts were opened, and their fresh milk poured into the cups. With an attempt at showmanship, Shu drew a katana and tried to use it to slice one of the coconuts open. He only succeeded partially, but the crack in the shell was enough to pour the milk out. Bulma had the impression that he hadn't gotten the chance to train this whole exercise very much beforehand.

"Let's talk, then." said the girl, looking back at Pilaf. "If I understand this correctly, Your Majesty plans to gather the Dragon Balls, and ask the dragon to make you king in place of the current one, King Furry. Is that correct?"

Pilaf smiled. "Great minds think alike."

"Well, I am sorry if this disappoints you, but I do not think it is a great plan. First, I have been dedicating a great deal of thought to the matter of how to correctly express and frame a wish. Can Your Majesty say the same? Have you considered the possibility that the dragon literally only teleports you to the throne room with a crown on your head, without planting into anyone the idea that you ought to be king? It would just be a very quick road to the gallows."

The prospective king's smile vanished. Obviously, this thought had not passed through his mind.
"Then there's the issue of whether this enterprise can succeed at all. You still only have one Dragon Ball."

"That will not be a problem." Mai raised from her chair and walked up to Goku, who lifted his head to look at her, not especially threatened. She grabbed the sack lying next to his chair. "If you pay us the tribute you owe," she said, and she emptied the sack on the table.

Five tennis balls fell and bounced loudly amidst the cutlery and glasses, knocking a couple of them down. Goku avoided a spray of wine deftly by raising a small dessert plate as a shield.

Mai and Pilaf's eyes were now fixated on the balls, who were idly rolling across the white tablecloth. Shu was still focused on cracking those damn coconuts.

"Did you know?" said Bulma. "You can keep Dragon Balls inside simple storage capsules. They still emit their signal, though. Something about the way their magic couples to the electromagnetic field."

"Then give us that capsule." Mai's eyes were ice cold "Lord Pilaf has authorised me to collect your tribute with any means necessary."

"Wait, we didn't..." stuttered Pilaf, who was getting closer to a pale turquoise colour as the situation escalated.

"Refusal to cooperate shall be considered high treason. And the punishment for high treason is death."

And saying so, Mai raised her sidearm and pointed it to Bulma's head.

"Now, let's stay calm." she said, almost managing to hide a slight crack in her voice. "You must understand that my family has... some interests involved in this matter. We do not make weapons, but we are the main contractor for the Royal Defense Force when it comes to gear and vehicles. The current regime is one that goes to our advantage. You wouldn't imagine that I didn't inform them of my presence here, right?"

Mai thought for a second, uncertain. "That would be incredibly reckless of you." she agreed.

Bulma smiled innocently. "Right? And if news of this little adventure of yours reached the ears of King Furry somehow through them, well, you know how these things go. The punishment for high treason is death."

Mai's eyes were now burning with fury. "Are you trying to threaten us?"

Pilaf's suffocated whimper said that she was very much succeeding, too.

"I am merely saying that you would be better off having us as friends than as enemies. So let's put the guns away, shall we? Goku," and she turned to the boy, who was following the scene tense but without hinting at intervening yet, "please help Shu, will you?"

Goku nodded and got up from his chair. Mai was disoriented for a moment, fearing an attack, but then saw he was not coming towards her. The kid reached Shu, whose katana was now stuck across a shell that it failed to slice in a single hit, and who was painfully trying to extract it.

Without saying a word, Goku grabbed one of the coconuts that were still whole, held it with one hand, and retracted the other. There was a hiss and a cracking sound, like pistol fire, and the next moment he pulled back his finger, leaving a round hole, perfect like a bullet's, in the coconut shell.
He handed it to Shu, who took it with shaking hands and used the hole to pour the milk out.

Mai did not let much emotion show, but she slowly lowered her gun and put it back inside the holster. Pilaf was pretty much hugging his throne.

"That's better." Bulma relaxed a bit herself. "You should not take my words badly, Your Majesty. We can very much come to an agreement. But I have a duty to ensure our family still keeps an equally, or more, prominent position in your new regime before I cede you the Dragon Balls. And we need to study the exact formulation of your wish, for me to be sure of my investment. These matters are perhaps too tedious and long to discuss at the end of what has doubtlessly being a tiring day for us all, so what would you say that we just spend the night here and we go over it extensively tomorrow?"

Mai went to Pilaf and whispered something in his ear. There was an animated exchange, and probably a disagreement. Bulma didn't hear well as they were both talking in a very low voice, but the body language was clear enough. Pilaf especially was waving around his hands, with open palms, in a gesture of exasperation.

Finally, Mai sat down, and looked rather unhappy. Whatever the argument, she had not won it.

"We would be delighted." said Pilaf, adjusting himself on the throne and using his napkin to dry his sweat. "This seems to us like real progress towards a fruitful and hopefully long cooperation."

"Your Majesty takes the words right out of my mouth." said Bulma, with a smile.

"Shu, arrange for our guests to stay in one of the rooms in the east tower." Pilaf accompanied his orders with small pointing gestures. "Mai, take care of any necessary precautions. And guide them to their rooms once all is ready, open the doors for them. You understand," he turned to Bulma, "we can't just give you the passcodes to our security system."

"Yes, obviously."

A few minutes later, Shu came back to inform them that all was arranged, and the painfully prepared dessert had finally been tasted by everyone. Ironically, Bulma felt it would have perhaps tasted better without the coconut milk. Mai, blatantly not very pleased, walked to the door, ready to accompany the guests out.

"Well, this is the end of a most productive evening." Bulma got up and walked to Pilaf's throne. "Your Majesty, I know this may seem a breach of etiquette, but I feel like it would be bad luck not to seal our new business agreement the way we do back in West City."

And she extended her right hand towards him.

"Oh, a handshake." Pilaf nodded. "Well, it is a somewhat plebeian habit, but given the circumstances, we will allow it."

He extended his arm, while still sitting on the throne, and they shook hands firmly.

With this, the evening was officially over. The tension dissipated as everyone was smiling, except Goku who kept his usual neutral expression. Bulma and her companion were escorted out by Mai. In silence, they passed a couple of password-guarded doors, and rose the stairs of a tower. On the third floor, they stopped and Mai opened to them a door and showed them around a nicely furnished bedroom, with two beds, a desk, a fridge, and an ensuite bathroom. There was a window showing the starred sky, and the only sign that this was the lair of a villainous organization rather than a luxury hotel were the iron bars crossing it vertically. Finally, they exchanged extremely forced
courtesies and she gave them a key card for their room, plus showed where they could call for help if they needed to be let out of the residence wing. Mai closed the door behind her.

Bulma brought a finger to her lips, signalling Goku not to speak yet. She looked a bit around the room, the extracted a capsule from her bag, popped it up to reveal a small case and pulled a gadget out of it. She arranged the gizmo on a table and turned it on. Goku felt a sort of inaudible pressure in his ears the instant she flicked the switch.

Bulma sighed. She dragged herself to one of the beds and let herself fall on it. The calm she had flaunted all evening suddenly melted away from her face. Her eyes widened and her eyelids twitched. She gripped the bedsheets, burying her fingers inside them.

"THAT CRAZY BITCH WAS ABOUT TO SHOOT ME!" she screamed.

Chapter End Notes

As you can see, I've changed a bit the personality of the Pilaf gang compared to the original - I wanted for them to make more challenging antagonists, and also acknowledge that considering all the gear they have, and the fact that they did manage to find at least one Dragon Ball, they can't be TOO incompetent. They still are not the brightest bulbs in the bunch, though.
Dungeons and Dragon Balls

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the idea and characters of Dragon Ball are owned by Akira Toriyama. This is a simple non-profit fan parody.

Chapter 5 - Dungeons and Dragon Balls

Outskirts of Konsai Town, Bulma's capsule house, yesterday

"Bulma?"

"Yes, Goku?"

She had arranged the bed inside the windowless closet in which they had agreed he would stay, and now he was about to go to sleep. She didn't put him down as the type to ask to be either tucked in or told a bedtime story though.

"The house we're in - it's all a capsule, right? So if I were to... cause trouble, could you just turn it back into a capsule with me inside? What would happen? Would that stop me?"

Some bedtime story this would end up being.

Bulma sighed. "Well, yes, it would. You would die. That's one of the three Brief's Laws of capsule statics."

She sat down next to him, on the bed.

"When my father created capsules for the first time, before I was born, he started experimenting to verify all their properties, and he discovered these laws. They seemed to be first principles, and they're the first thing that is taught to every student in every course on capsules. It's the ABC of capsule safety, in fact. So I guess it's time to get you through them too."

"Law number one: all dynamical processes in an encapsulated object come to a halt. Movement, chemical reactions, everything. The encapsulated object is effectively frozen in time. So, for example, if you encapsulated a clock, no matter how much time passes, when you pop it up it will still show the same time it did originally."

"There are clocks in this house, though." pointed out Goku.

"Yes, there are, but they're all digital, and they re-synch via radio signal every time I pop it up. Now, you could assume this would be a safe way to at least live until as far in the future as you like - just freeze yourself inside a capsule and get out in a few hundred years - but here comes the biggest issue, law number two."

"Law number two states that all living beings with a brain immediately die upon being encapsulated. This is the least understood of the three laws - though now that I know about the probable existence
of souls, I can make guesses."

Goku frowned. "Has this been experimented on humans?"

"We're not monsters, you know! We experimented on animals. It always checked out. They all died. Their body froze in whatever condition it was before the encapsulation. When restored, everything seemed perfectly fine, but brain activity just would not restart. And also, unfortunately, there were a couple accidents with workers or careless users in the early days, so yes, we do know it happens to humans too. For this reason, in fact, stay assured, there's plenty of safety mechanisms in a house like this. Thermal, humidity and CO2 sensors that will block re-encapsulation if there's only the suspicion of there being a human being or a big animal inside the house."

"Finally, law number three states that no capsule should ever be left inside another capsule. If it does, then it will break down, and anything it contained will be lost forever. There are sensors to try and prevent that from happening as well."

She patted Goku's head.

"But rest assured, you will not be left inside here while I re-encapsulate the house to trap you. There will be no need to do anything so drastic. You will not transform. And if you were to, well, I'd just take a plane and go observe you from a safe distance until you turn back."

She smiled.

"And now that you've had your bedtime science lesson, you can go to sleep."

"My what?"

"Goodnight!"

She turned the light off and left.

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East tower, Residence Wing A, third floor, 10:45 PM

Bulma's nervous fit lasted for a while. For a few minutes, she either smashed pillows one onto each other, punched the mattress, or buried her mouth in the duvet and screamed incoherently about how she simply had had enough of this whole madness, how no boyfriend was going to be worth having a gun pointed at her in two separate occasions in just two days, and how utterly incredible was that you just had to step out of the city to find yourself in a world apparently held tight in the clutch of criminals, madmen, or both. Goku observed the outburst sitting calmly, without batting an eye, and taking in a significant amount of new vocabulary (most of it profanities). At the end of it, Bulma was exhausted, was panting, and her voice was somewhat hoarse.

"Are you finished?" asked Goku.

Bulma stared at him with eyes burning with anger, while standing on all fours on the bed.

"That crazy bitch," she hissed, "was about to shoot me."

And she let herself fall down, exhausted.

"Now I'm finished."

"I'm sorry, perhaps I should have intervened?" said Goku, regretful. "I know it would have hurt you
"Nah, you did the right thing. It would have made the situation more complicated. I talked myself out of it anyway."

Bulma raised her eyebrow, suddenly noticing something.

"What do you mean, 'hurt'? It would have killed me. Where'd you get that idea?"

Goku was confused. "Well, back when you were a carrot..."

"I so hate that that sentence even exists and makes sense to me."

"...back then, I got hit by one of the rabbit's men. They were launching these tiny metal things with their guns. See? I still have a bruise."

He produced his arm as evidence. Bulma came closer to take a look. The spot that had been hit was indeed now taking a dark violet hue.

"Fantastic," she said, "apparently you're also bulletproof. Now I really want to just unload a whole cartridge on you."

"You mean as a scientific experiment, or as a misguided way of relieving your frustration?"

"Both."

She stood still for a while, staring into the void and reordering her thoughts. She had a few ideas about her next moves. It had to be all pretty improvised - as it turned out, walking straight into the home turf of the enemy just to prove a point to her scrupled comrade had not been the smartest idea. When all the cleverness you have over the naive little bumpkin who thinks someone is good and wants to go right to them is thinking someone is bad and still going right to them, well, that isn't much in the way of cleverness at all. She had thought they'd just be fine, but under Mai's gun she had just realised how the ultimate chance of victory did not mean she couldn't end up being collateral damage. The invincible one was the kid with a monkey's tail sitting in front of her. And he could afford going through life while being innocent and trusting because he always had the option to survive the first attack and then retaliate in force. She didn't, though. Her quick wits were all that saved her back then, and now she would need to use them again to get out of this situation, and possibly get the Dragon Ball. Even one seventh of unlimited power in the hands of these people was clearly one seventh too much as far as she was concerned.

"Listen, Goku. We came here, we talked with them, I nearly died. I hope you are satisfied that these are not reasonable or sane people, and that we should not trust them with the Dragon Balls."

Goku reluctantly nodded.

"I agree. I am disappointed by the fact, but your theory was right. Despite not being supported by evidence back at the time."

"Except knowing people better than you," Bulma said with a triumphant sneer, "but well, let's move on. Per our previous agreement, that means that you have no qualms about forcefully taking the Dragon Ball from them?"

"I would not say that." Goku was carefully thinking about his words. "If all they ever have is one Ball, it is useless. That much is sufficient."
"But this way, you are locking away forever the possibility to use the Dragon Balls for anything else. One of them will always be in the hands of this bumbling idiot and his court. So all the potential good that could be done with the Dragon Balls - remember, one wish per year, potentially for the rest of our natural lives, or unnatural ones, if we decide to wish so - is out of question too. All because of your refusal to commit a simple crime against property - stealing what will only be a useless doorstopper to them, if your own intention to keep the other six Balls out of their hands goes through. Not to mention, we will have to defend against the threat posed by them for the rest of our lives as well. If we fail, they get the Balls and their wish."

"Your reasoning makes sense." Goku was fidgeting with his hands, a frantic finger activity that seemed to reflect his inner one. "But while I approve in general, I still do not feel like taking part in such an action personally. I am sorry, I know it is not coherent of me. But I do not feel like encouraging myself to make... exceptions to rules. No matter the reason."

"It's alright. I did not expect that much of you. But you will not go as far as stop me from doing it, will you?"

"Yes. It's definitely the lesser evil."

"Perfect. That is all I need. Now give me a minute."

Bulma got up from the bed and retrieved her bag. She unhinged it from its shoulder strap and clipped it in to her belt as a pouch, in a way that allowed her more freedom of movement. She popped up a capsule that turned into a huge luggage bag, grabbed her gun holster from it and clipped that to her belt too. She picked up the Dragon Radar, and turned it on in silent mode. She rummaged through the luggage a little more, grabbing some other things that she put in her bag-turned-pouch, and one round device with a blinking red LED that she placed on the bedside table, then left the rest of the luggage on the bed. Finally, she retrieved out a black beanie beret and pulled it over her head. Hiding the shine of her bright blue hair might give her a little more cover while sneaking in the darkness.

"Ok, I am ready. I never thought I'd get to play burglar in real life, but here we are. Remember, they might come looking for the Dragon Balls, so hold the fort. Don't open the door, be on your guard, and expect unusual attacks. I don't have time to explain to you all the possible weapons they could use, so as a general rule: if you don't know what it is, don't touch it with your bare skin, don't breathe it, and don't look at it directly if at all possible. Just get rid of it. Grab this."

She tossed a small earbud-like item to Goku. He caught it and looked at it from all sides.

"Plug that in your ear. I'll wear the companion one. You won't be able to communicate with me - courtesy of the jammer I placed earlier in this room - but you should be able to hear me talking. Listen up: if I get caught, or found, or I'm talking with anyone for any reason, don't come. But if I say the words 'Plan B', then I'm in trouble. Come helping however you can."

"How are you going to deal with the security?" asked Goku "When we came here, Mai had to push some buttons to open the doors."

"Don't worry about that. I know how to do it. And if I need your help, don't hold back. Smash through rock and metal if needed and when you can. I know the castle is rigged with traps so I did not want to risk it, but well, if it comes to that," she slid the key card to open the room, then tossed it to Goku, "raze this place to the ground."

And she disappeared in the darkness of the corridor, as the door closed itself back behind her.
"Your Majesty, may I speak my mind freely?"

Pilaf sighed. "You have done nothing else since we have left the dinner table. But please, Mai, do proceed."

"The decision to let these people in our castle was a catastrophic mistake, and if we do not act now, it will be too late."

Mai's anger and sense of urgency were so palpable, both Shu and Pilaf had stepped away from her a couple meters, just to stay on the safe side. Still, she was barely letting the tip of it show - her attitude was still professional, her movements extremely controlled. It's just that you could see that behind her eyes, and under her skin, was boiling a violent temper pushing for her to spring into action and take the situation into her own hands.

"The woman is up to something, I have no doubt. She's not the type to back down or compromise this easily. She needed time, and she needed to be inside our castle, and now she has both those things."

"My dear Mai, what could she do? Our security is impregnable."

"It would have been if we didn't let our enemies willy-nilly past multiple layers of it."

Shu tried to busy himself with the castle mainframe as much as possible. Not that he had anything specific to do. He just desperately wanted to avoid being dragged into this.

"We should just check on them. Their room is bugged, is it not?"

"Yes, but that is just part of the problem, Your Majesty." Mai walked to the mainframe's console herself. "Shu, put through the feed from the guests' room."

Pressing a couple buttons, the ninja obeyed. The room was instantly flooded with an unholy, ear-piercing screech. After a few seconds of suffering, Mai gave Shu a sign to cut the signal, and blissful silence returned.

"Well, that is suspicious." Pilaf shrugged. "But, I'm sure you understand, Mai, a girl may wish for some privacy I guess."

"Some privacy? That's a ultrasonic jammer. She's definitely up to something, Your Majesty, I ask for your permission to go guard the Dragon Ball, personally."

"Not granted." Pilaf frowned. "That would be unnecessary, the Dragon Ball is well defended enough that we would know immediately if something happened to it. We are more worried about our own person. What if you are right, but their target is in fact us? We could see King Furry sending an assassin to end our dynasty once and for all. We would like you to be at our side as our bodyguard for now."

"I am honoured by your choice, though I do not believe this to be the case." Mai avoided showing any emotion at that. "But as you wish, Your Majesty. Then send Shu."

"No. We have our own plans for him."

Shu raised his ears.
"Shu, can you check the situation on the Dragon Radar?"

"At once, Lord Pilaf."

A huge green screen lighted up, showing an outlined map of the castle. Two bright dots were visible.

"Though our resolution is poor, the castle is big enough that we can tell the difference, approximately." Shu accompanied his explanation by pointing at the screen. "This is our Dragon Ball, still held in the treasure room. This other dot corresponds to residence wing A, so that must be the other five Dragon Balls in our guests' possession. Held in some capsule kept in their room."

"Excellent, Shu." Pilaf nodded, satisfied. "See, Mai? We are in perfect control of the situation. Even if the woman tried sneaking out of her room, she could not get outside of the residence wing, let alone inside the treasure rooms, as she does not have the passcodes. Meanwhile, we can just go to their room and get their Dragon Balls for ourselves. If they're outside the room, all the better!"

Shu raised a trembling hand. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty. Do you mean I should go in the same room as, uhm, the coconut kid?"

"Surely. That is the path to victory. As Mai has often reminded us, the best defense is offense!"

"That is, uhm, all right, Your Majesty." Shu's voice took a pleading tone. "But you've seen what that kid can do. How should I deal with him?"

Mai scoffed. "How cowardly."

"Cowardly? You think you would do better? Is your skull harder than mine?"

"No bickering among our subjects." Pilaf shut both up with a hand gesture. "Shu, you're going, and that's final. You will be okay. You can pick up anything you need from the armoury. Strength is not all that matters, and we trust your cunning and stealth. Oh, and conceal your face. It would be a problem if you were seen and recognised."

The ninja sighed and bowed. "As you wish, Your Majesty."

He then zipped in a neighbouring room to go pick his equipment for the mission.

"Perfect. See, Mai? All your worrying was for nothing." Pilaf gestured towards the screen "Tonight, we will acquire all but the last of the Dragon Balls."

Mai didn't answer. She kept looking at the screen, where the two blips kept flashing, unmoving.

East Tower, Residence Wing A, first floor, 11:13 PM

Moving in silence in enemy territory wasn't exactly part of Bulma's usual activities. As a result, she walked carefully every step of the way, and kept listening to the slightest noise. Anything other than her heart bumping violently against her chest, at least.

Which was how she actually heard it. The distinct blip of one of the security doors opening. It was muffled, as if someone pressed a hand against the board to stop the sound, but it was there.

She experienced a moment of panic, then quickly shifted into problem solving mode. As far as problems went, this was not actually too hard. Whoever was entering probably was going upstairs, to try and steal the Dragon Balls. So if she just could hide, they would pass her by. She quickly seized
the perfect opportunity - a closet with some cleaning tools and detergents. She squeezed herself among the brooms, and closed the door behind her.

"Goku, on your guard, they're coming to your room." she whispered, hoping her mic would be good enough to pick it up.

Then she dared make no more sound, and in fact tried to hold her breath. As she waited in the closet, she heard clearly someone climbing up the stairs with a very light step, running past the door, going up.

She would have waited more, but if the enemy had started moving, it might not be too long before they actually did something that would put an end to her plan too. She had to risk it. Bulma pushed the door open again, very carefully, then slid out of the closet, and started climbing the stairs down again, this time as fast as she could.

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Castle basement, Machine Room, 11:20 PM

The room had been immersed in a rather awkward silence since Shu had left. The only sounds were the constant whirring of the hard drives and cooling fans of the mainframe and the occasional chirping sound from the radar screen. Mai would frequently and nervously check it out, hoping to see the successful outcome of Shu's mission play out. The two dots indicating the positions of the Dragon Balls, however, obstinately refused to move.

It was getting late. Shu should have had all the time to reach the room. Perhaps he was having trouble finding the Balls? Could they be hidden too well? Or had something worse happened?

Pilaf started walking back and forth, hands behind his back. Mai just kept staring at the screen.

"May I ask Your Majesty a question?" she said, suddenly.

"You already have. But ask away, May."

"Why did you tell Shu to conceal his face?"

"Well, that is part of our cunning, dear Mai." said Pilaf, sounding way less convinced than his words tried to make it seem. "Plausible deniability. If he gets seen but manages to escape, we can say that he was just someone who broke into our castle without our knowledge. And we safeguard our relationship with the girl and... her family."

Mai squinted. "You believe her? What she threatened?"

"It's a risk we can not afford to take." grumbled Pilaf. "We should tread more carefully than we did until now."

"Your Majesty, you should not let yourself be intimidated. She's just a skilled bluffer, I'm almost sure of it."

She bent down, on her knee, lowering her head.

"You are our King, after all. You should not show hesitation or fear in front of the enemy. They are not worthy."

Pilaf was taken by surprise. His cheeks got flushed.
"Mai, please, rise!" he bumbled, waving his hands in front of him "It's nice of you, but really, we would not be here without your valuable help and contribution. If we will sit on the throne, we will make sure you are handsomely rewarded for your loyalty."

The woman raised her head. Her eye caught the palms of Pilaf's hands, that he was showing open, and somewhat sweaty, in his moment of embarrassment.

"Your Majesty," she suddenly asked, jumping up to her feet, "may I shake your hand?"

"Huh? Sure, Mai, sure. You are very kind, but..."

Without waiting for much more permission, Mai grabbed Pilaf's right hand and vigorously shook it with hers. Pilaf was still confused as the woman looked at her own palm, her eyes widened in shock and alarm.

"Your Majesty," she said, "I am not the first person to do this tonight, right?"

"Well, no. That woman, Bulma, wanted to shake our hand too."

"And for the last half hour or so we've been counting on her not having the passcodes to enter the treasure room."

Mai pushed forward her own right palm. On it, smudged but well readable, was a perfect mirror impression of a few number sequences, corresponding exactly to where Pilaf had written them on his own hand with a marker. They were even labelled with letters to indicate which one corresponded to which room.

"DAMN IT!" screamed Mai as she stormed out of the room, leaving Pilaf standing alone, muted, in the middle of a big empty room full of whirring machines.

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Castle dungeons, Treasure Room, 11:25 PM

The door of the elevator opened, and Bulma walked in. Her radar didn't miss a beat - the Dragon Ball must be ahead of her, somewhere in a two meters range. The resolution wasn't enough to guide her exactly at this point, but this was close enough.

Getting those passcodes had been a lucky stroke, and Bulma was rather satisfied with herself for how she had managed to improvise after noticing that something was written on Pilaf's hand at dinner. Her only regret was not being able to be smug about it in the face of those idiots. Anyway, this was just one more reason why it was so important to prevent Pilaf's rise to power. Who could possibly imagine having that kind of idiot handling State secrets?

Most of the room was empty - being a treasure room, it did not project a great image of the owner's finances - but that only made finding the Dragon Ball easier. What made it outright trivial, however, was that the Dragon Ball was placed squarely in the middle of a pedestal, on a square column, in the middle of the room, with a spotlight illuminating it from the ceiling.

Bulma walked up to the pedestal and observed it, without touching the Ball, for now. The pedestal it was sitting on was a sort of large metallic plate; it held seven slight sockets with a spherical curvature. The Ball was nudged comfortably in one of them, fitting perfectly. The plate seemed disconnected from the rest of the pedestal, as if it could move freely. A weight sensitive alarm, perhaps? Or something more sophisticated, thought Bulma.
A loud clanging sound came from above. Someone was knocking on the door of the elevator, upstairs. A voice came, muffled but understandable, through the elevator's shaft.

"Bulma Briefs, the game is over! Leave the Dragon Ball where it is, take the elevator, toss any weapons you have on the ground and come out with your hands behind your head!"

———

East tower, Residence Wing A, third floor, 11:15 PM

Silent and almost confident that if required he could be deadly too, a black mask covering his face, like a proper ninja, Shu stealthily walked towards the door of the room where the guests were supposed to be staying. He put his ear on it, and could not hear any voices or noises. If he was lucky, the two were already in their beds. Next, he extracted a copy of the key card he had gotten from the mainframe and unlocked the door. He waited another bit to hear if someone reacted, but nothing happened. Only then he pushed the door - slowly - and opened a small gap, only a few centimetres wide. Not big enough for him, but big enough for the small cylinder he had just unclipped from his belt. He pulled a pin and made it roll on the floor, inside the room. Then he closed the door.

He pulled out a filtering mask, and strapped it in front of his mouth and nose.

He counted to ten, waiting for the sleep gas to properly fill the room and stun the occupants for good.

And finally, he pushed the door open again, bursting in the room, confident that he would not meet any opposition.

"Oh, it's you." said Goku, who was casually standing next to the bed.

Shu froze in place. The sound that a finger could make when piercing through something hard and round rung back in his head. He drew the sword he kept on his back, and held it in front of him with trembling hands.

Goku seemed unimpressed, and did not even bother taking a fighting stance. He walked towards the middle of the room, always keeping an eye on the intruder, though.

"It is a pity that my sleeping gas did not knock you out." said Shu, puffing his chest out, and holding his sword on his side, ready to slice.

"I see, so that's what it was." Goku opened his left hand, showing that he was holding a capsule inside it. "Since I needed to get rid of it quickly, I put it inside the luggage and closed it back into a capsule."

Shu stepped forward.

"Give me the Dragon Balls," his voice was now too high pitched to sound very threatening, "or you will face the wrath of my blade!"

"I think you should not use that thing in a fight." pointed out Goku, very seriously. "At dinner you could not even use it to cut coconuts. You could hurt yourself."

The dog emitted a strangled noise and started coughing. Bent on his knees, he ripped off his mask from his face, since obviously not only it served no purpose, but was now so drenched in sweat he couldn't breath through it any more.

"Now that you've seen my true identity," he was panting and still occasionally coughing, "you have
to die."

At this, Goku pushed a foot forward and pulled back a closed fist. "That is not going to happen."

The next few seconds were very confused for Shu. He felt himself lunging forward - he was not even sure why he was doing that as it was obviously completely suicidal, but he also had no choice really, did he? He screamed, trying to pump himself up, and clenched the sword, prepared to swing, while in his head the hope for unexpected victory and the nigh certainty of imminent death clashed and swapped places multiple times in a fraction of a second. And when the contact came, it was too fast to discern. He felt pressure applied somewhere, and he felt his balance go completely nuts, and he felt light, as if he was flying.

When his senses finally managed to give him a coherent picture of reality again, he found himself lying on his back, on the ground, with his sword a few meters away, stuck in the wall, and Goku sitting on his chest. The boy looked him in the eyes. His gaze was distant and cool.

"Ok, so now that I have you here..."

"Please don't kill me." Shu managed to whisper.

"...I wanted to ask you, why do you support that Pilaf person? He does not look like he would be a very good king."

"Uh?"

The ninja blinked, and then tried his best to sound defiant, as a captured warrior ought to.

"King Pilaf is the rightful heir to the throne." he said, even though it was hard to speak with that kid sitting on top of his lungs. "I will lay down my life for him."

"I see." Goku nodded "So you believe in bloodrights, or some kind of charismatic origin for power. Personally, I'm more of a social contract kind of guy. If you think about it..."

Goku went on to rant for a while on things that Shu did not really feel like trying to understand right now. He tried to wriggle himself free from under his captor, but the boy was strong and would use his arms to push him down in the perfect spots to inexorably pin him to the floor. He was not sure if he should believe that this guy really was as dorky as he tried to look, or if it was all just a ruse to lull him in a false sense of safety before delivering the final blow. Either way, it was not pleasant to be at the complete mercy of someone that Shu knew could smash his skull in a second.

After what felt like an eternity (so, probably ten minutes or such), the boy stopped talking and froze for a moment. It was like he was listening to something. Shu looked closer and noticed a small earbud in his right ear. He must be in contact with the girl through that.

"...I'm sorry." Goku got up, finally freeing Shu from his imprisonment. "I have to go now. I would really like to convince you to not pursue this road, but there is no time right now."

Shu was dumbfounded. He was really free to go? He recollected himself, patted his clothes to remove some dust, and went to recover his sword.

"Oh, right." Goku now was outside the door, but he looked back inside for a moment. "You said the gas you used was just meant to make us sleep, so it would not have done any permanent damage, right?"

"What?" the ninja turned for a moment, while still pulling hard on the sword to free it from the wall.
"No, nothing permanent."

"Good to know."

Goku tossed something inside and closed the door behind him. Shu had a second to register that that something was the capsule he had kept in his hand this whole time before it popped up into a big luggage bag, and time restarted for all things inside, including the sleeping gas grenade. A white cloud filled the room, and Shu felt his mind go blank like everything else around him.

———

Ground floor, in front of the Treasure Room elevator, 11:27 PM

"Bulma Briefs, the game is over! Leave the Dragon Ball where it is, take the elevator, toss any weapons you have on the ground and come out with your hands behind your head!"

Mai leveled her gun at the elevator door, and waited for an answer. This was the only way out, so all Bulma could do at this point was delay the inevitable. Luckily, it seemed like she quickly realised that. A short time after Mai had given the order, the elevator started whirring and came back to the ground floor. When the doors opened, Bulma was inside, her hands behind her head as ordered. On the floor of the elevator was a handgun.

Mai did not relax. "Now slowly walk out. Don't move those hands or I'll shoot."

Bulma obeyed. She was barely outside when Mai fired, causing her to let out a small scream. Hit by the bullet, the security pad of the elevator started fizzling with sparks. The door automatically closed, following its failsafe protocol.

"Shu is going to get annoyed at that," said Mai, "but it was necessary. Now you can't try any funny things to go back down or recover your gun any more. And your mission has failed. You did not manage to get the Dragon Ball, or the alarms would be ringing."

"Would they?" Bulma smirked. "Maybe I exchanged the Dragon Ball with something of equal weight."

Mai smiled back. "Now I know you didn't. The alarm is not based on weight alone - it detects the signal emitted by the Dragon Ball as well. Plus, we would realise with the radar as soon as you got far enough from the original position of the Ball. You're just a desperate woman bluffing to gain time."

"What, you don't think I have a Plan B?"

"I don't think you do, no. I think you're all talk and no substance." She waved her gun slightly, pointing at a direction away from the door, towards the centre of the room. "Now follow me. Coming into our base to steal from us. Some cheek you have."

Bulma obeyed. She walked in a weird way though - almost as if keeping her head awkwardly twisted so that Mai wouldn't see her right ear.

"Come here!" she shouted, grabbing her arm and pulling it violently towards her. She twisted Bulma's head. Sure enough, she was wearing some kind of communication device. Mai ripped it off, threw it on the ground and stomped it with her foot.

"One more backup plan down." she said, unamused. "Any other surprises for me?"
Bulma shrugged, insofar as you could possibly do that with your hands in the position she had hers. "Just my parents and the entirety of the Royal Defense Force ready to come here and steamroll your sorry asses if you as much as lay a finger on me."

"Yeah, not buying that either, rich girl. Maybe you are who you say you are, but if that's it, I'm sure you didn't tell your parents anything. This is you spoiled brats' idea of a little escapade to draw attention on yourself. You hoping to go back to your parents and find them all worried for you or something? Maybe bringing along a cute new boyfriend?"

Bulma blushed so hard, you almost couldn't tell her lips from the rest of her face.

"Touched a nerve, I see." Mai smirked. "You chose the wrong game to play, rich girl. This isn't your private school's debate club."

A loud, metallic sound came from a nearby door.

Mai turned around, alarmed. "What's that?"

Again, the same sound. Like something small but fast smashing shoulder-first into the steel plates. The plaster and concrete around it started cracking under the pressure.

Bulma smiled. "That's the debate club champion."

The other woman looked confused, then had a moment of realisation. "Of course. The kid. Should have imagined Shu would fail at dealing with him. Well, I won't make the same mistake."

Bulma shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Mai walked to the front of the door that Goku was trying to knock down - it was a testament to the quality of construction of this place, Bulma thought, that it had managed to withstand multiple hits from that kid without breaking. Another hit came, and Mai pointed her gun straight at the center of the door, approximately where she would have expected the kid's head to be, given his height. Then she used her other hand to input the passcode to the door.

The door slid open as Goku was charging straight for the fourth time. He only had time to raise his eyes in surprise before Mai fired her gun straight at him and hit him in the forehead. Goku was knocked back a meter by the blow and landed on the floor.

Then he jumped back up, with nothing but a bruise between his eyes, and a rather pissed off look.

Mai's mouth was agape. "What the..."

And in that moment of distraction, Bulma swung her bag, now unclipped from her belt, and smashed it right into the side of her head. Mai staggered and fell to the side.

"Thanks for giving me that opening, Goku!" she said. "Now let's go!"

"That hurt, you know."

"Couldn't have done anything either way. Good thing it only did that!"

"YOU!" roared Mai, getting back on her feet. Bulma let out a scream and pushed Goku back in the corridor where he had come from.

"Quick, smash that keypad!"
Goku hit the pad with his fist, and instantaneously the door closed back, just in time to leave out the still groggy Mai, who now could only scream at them and punch the metal.

"What the heck." Bulma stared in disbelief. "I thought that would knock her down for hours. It always works in movies."

"That is not how it works." said Goku "Whatever these movies are, they don't sound like a reliable source of knowledge about the human body."

"Says the guy who just took a bullet to the forehead and barely got fazed. Let's go, before she somehow unlocks the damn thing."

They started climbing up the stairs. They were at the first floor when they heard a small explosion downstairs, and a cloud of smoke rose through the stairs, signalling the door had been forcefully removed. They sped up their pace.

"Where are we going?" asked Goku.

"Our room, right? Let's pick up our stuff and then leave."

"The problem is I left it locked, with Shu inside." Goku was sounding a little concerned now. "Flooded with sleeping gas."

"Oh, great." Bulma stopped. "What then?"

"I can beat Mai up." suggested Goku.

"Not while I'm around. I don't want to get caught in the crossfire, and she's smart enough to go after me if she can't beat you. Let's just leave everything and smash out of a window here."

"But your bag..."

"I know. We don't have much choice. Open one of these rooms."

The doors of the guestrooms were made of wood, so smashing through one of them was much easier. Goku and Bulma got inside, and on the girl's order, the first started bending and ripping out the bars at the window. Meanwhile Bulma quickly pushed furniture in front of the broken door to work as a barricade. The dust had settled, and they could hear Mai storming in below.

"Can we go? She's almost here!"

"Done, the window is open. How do we leave?"

"Your stick. Follow my instructions."

Goku hesitated a moment. Outside, Mai was climbing the stairs and was probably almost there.

"What's up?" asked Bulma.

"The Moon." said Goku. "It's not perfectly full today, but I'm not sure if..."

"Oh, okay! Close your eyes then, I'll guide you. Grab me."

They got on top of the window sill. Goku was the one crouching down, his feet on the sill, eyes closed. Bulma was grabbing him from his back and holding tight. Outside, Mai was already banging and pushing against the flimsy barricade.
"Ok, now take the pole! Point its end down and forward, at an angle, then extend it down until you feel it touching the ground. Now imagine it stiffer - but not so stiff that it doesn't buckle a bit in the middle - perfect!"

The barricade fell. Mai entered, gun ready to fire.

"Let's go!"

Goku gave a slight push forwards and upwards, and they were in the air. The chill of the wind against Bulma's face as they swung felt like freedom - but not safety, not yet.

"Now make your stick shorter! Slowly. We need to keep a bit of balance and slow down our fall. Don't lose contact with the terrain!"

Behind her, Mai fired out of the window, but they were already far enough that it would take a miracle for her to hit. The idea was working - they were pivoting on the stick, like a pole vaulter, except the stick was shortening and thus getting them closer to the ground while shedding away some speed. It still all happened incredibly fast - just a few seconds - but for Bulma it felt like time slowed to a crawl. Here she was, grabbing onto this kid who was guiding their fall with his eyes closed, suspended into the air, the ground coming fast, bullets zipping around her, heart pounding in her chest.

And weirdly enough, *enjoying* almost all of it.

The ground came closer, and as planned, they weren't nearly as fast as they would have been if in free fall. Still, it was a rough tumble. They hit the ground violently and rolled for a few meters. Goku got up unharmed - and his eyes still closed - but Bulma was aching, and bleeding at her knees and elbows. No serious wounds, though.

"Ok, now we run!"

She searched her pouch, drew a capsule and threw it. It popped out to reveal a small car.

"Sorry about this, Goku, but it's the safest way to keep you from seeing the Moon."

She opened the car's trunk and guided Goku to laying down inside, then closed it. There should be enough openings to allow for some air to enter. Then she climbed onto the driving seat, inserted a gear and pushed on the gas.

When Mai finally managed to climb down the stairs and reach the castle's entrance, they were long gone. All she could do was curse in disappointment as Goku and Bulma vanished at the horizon, leaving behind a cloud of dust as their vehicle ran on the desert terrain.
A game of drones

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the idea and characters of Dragon Ball are owned by Akira Toriyama. This is a simple non-profit fan parody.

Chapter 6 - A game of drones

When Shu came to his senses, he found himself in the middle of a crisis meeting. He was still groggy, so even with his eyes open, he kept laying back for a while.

"Oh, you're awake."

Mai casually acknowledged him, then looked like she wouldn't have dedicated another second to the matter, but Pilaf in person got up and reached the ninja.

"We're glad that no harm has come to you, loyal Shu!" he said "It would not have done for a king to lose one half of the forces under his command in a single battle. Your courage will be commended and rewarded."

"Thanks, Your Majesty." whispered Shu, still feeling a bit faint. "It was hard fought, but I did all I could to keep the honour of the Rice dynasty high."

"Hard fought!" Mai laughed "You fell on your bum and got yourself knocked out by your own weapon. You don't even have any wounds, meaning you were overpowered so easily that the enemy didn't even need to actually hurt you."

She looked at him with contempt. "But on one thing I agree." she added. "You did do all you could."

Shu groaned, still not in good enough shape to engage in a duel of witticisms - not that he would have won against her, anyway. He gestured that he was fine, and Pilaf, while still showing some worry, did leave him be, feeling that it would not do either for a king to appear too emotional about the health of a subject. He merely gave Mai the order to bring Shu a glass of water, and then the discussion resumed.

"I believe we should pursue them, Your Majesty." said Mai "Whether they succeeded or not, they're a threat, and should be swiftly disposed of."

"Do you believe they could inform the usurper of our intentions?" asked Pilaf.

"That, I don't think. First because I'm sure she was mostly bluffing and she's not doing this with the knowledge or consent of her parents, and second, because they want the Dragon Balls, and right now, apparently, they have none. To denounce us would mean to lose that chance forever, because they would have to explain the King about the seven mystical devices of infinite power, and well, you see why they might not want to do that."
"Wait a second!" Shu jumped up, suddenly revitalised. "What did you say? They don't have any Dragon Balls?"

Mai nodded. "That's right. They did not seem to succeed in getting the one from the basement, I think the girl was trying to figure out how to hijack our alarms when I caught up with her. And when they escaped they had to leave some of their stuff here. The radar shows the same blips as it did when they were in the castle. The Dragon Balls should be in a capsule around here."

"Did you check in on the one in the basement?" asked Shu.

"Not yet." Mai shrugged. "I had to blast the lock when she got out, to make sure she wouldn't escape that way, so it needs some repairs before we can go down again. I could have destroyed the door like I did the one to the Residential Wing, but then the elevator wouldn't work either."

"Wait," cried Shu alarmed, "you did what to the other door?"

"This is of no consequence." Pilaf cut short all complaints with a hand gesture. "The only result that matter is - this was a victory! Unconventional, if we want, but now we have six Dragon Balls out of seven inside this castle. We only need to find five of them. And we know they're in this room."

"Well... yes."

"So let's focus on getting our wish granted first. Once we will have that, nothing else will matter. And we're so close."

"As you wish, Your Majesty." Mai let out a small sigh. "What are your orders then?"

"You should stay here, Mai. We have two important tasks for you. The first is to find the Dragon Balls that are in this room. Just check all the capsules - with due care, in case some are booby trapped."

Mai nodded. That sounded almost shockingly sensible, coming from him.

"The second is to, uh... address the concern that girl raised at dinner. The one about the wish." Pilaf's kingly demeanour sort of drained out of him as he mentioned that.

"Your Majesty," said Mai, firmly "that was just an attempt at making you doubt your own destiny. Pay it no mind."

"Well, yes, but there may be some truth to it." muttered Pilaf. "There is no harm in giving it some thought, is there? Just think and let me know how you would formulate the wish if it was you. And not us. Since we are the legitimate king and all."

Mai bowed. "As you wish. And what will Your Majesty do?"

"Ah, here comes the importance of our in-depth study of history! The last Dragon Ball seems to be in the hands of the Ox King, a local lord who has limited power over his own territory, consisting of a mountain and the immediate surroundings. This is effectively an independent kingdom, in which the forces of King Furry have not established their domain yet. This brave, freedom-loving man and his ancestors before him have fiercely fended off all of their envoys until now."

"As everyone else who ever walked into their territory, from what I've read." Mai frowned. "With a broadaxe."

"But you do not know all of the story, Mai. We searched painfully and for long the royal library,"
and here Pilaf pointed to the digital tablet he was holding in his left hand, "and apparently his tiny
kingdom has splintered from the rest of the world back at the time of the Demon King. A remarkable
display of loyalty! This man's family has pledged fealty to our royal House, and thus since then
refuses to submit to the order imposed by the usurper. We are sure they will be happy and grateful to
know that not only we have returned, but that we require their assistance in going back to the
position we deserve."

Mai looked sceptical. "So, Your Majesty wants to go negotiate with him in person?"

"Precisely." Pilaf smiled, satisfied. "As soon as Shu feels well enough to go..."

Shu let out a whimper, just to make it clear that was not the case yet.

"...we will take one of our planes and pay him a royal visit. I am sure he will be a precious ally in the
fights to come, if those people pester us again."

"Well," Mai said, "that is certainly proactive. But what if it turns out to be dangerous? Is Your
Majesty fully confident in the historical accuracy of those sources?"

"Nonsense, Mai! Here we have a brave patriot, holding out for our own return to the throne. It is not
only our right - nay, it is our duty to let us be known by him, relieve him of the burden of kinghood,
and give him back his rightful place as our vassal. We are sure he will cry his eyes out in happiness
at the news. What danger could there possibly be?"

"NO ONE ENTERS MA' LAND AND LIVES!" roared the gigantic, bearded man in a horned
helment, waving his axe around threateningly. "YA BETTER SAY YER PRAYERS!"

Pilaf and Shu had barely gotten down from the plane when they were greeted by the owner of the
land, the Ox King himself, in all of his extremely intimidating majesty. The trip had been easy
enough. As they approached Mount Frypan, the only problems had come when they got close
each other close to feel the heat. It was well known how ten years before the mountain had inexplicably
cought fire, turning into a gigantic smouldering mound that scorched the area for kilometres all
around. At the beginning all they felt was just a slight rise in temperature, and they could see the
mountain sort of glowing in the distance. Then it got hotter, and the air currents started. Powered by
that gigantic fire, convection loops enveloped the whole area, causing turbulent currents that pushed
the plane down. Shu had done his best to keep the attitude as much as possible, but the closer they
got, the worse it became. When it started calming down he suggested they immediately land, as
coming any closer would probably mean entering the part of the loops where currents began
ascending - and then touching the ground safely would become almost impossible. Pilaf agreed,
somewhat disappointed at the sight of the distance that still separated them from their destination, and
they landed at the periphery of a small village that looked empty. They must have been sighted and
followed for some time, though, because it would have been hard to believe that the lord of the land
just happened to be exactly in that forgotten spot in which they arrived. Which solved the issue of
finding him, but posed another whole lot of problems, the most pressing of which being a decent risk
of decapitation in the next two minutes.

"We do not come to mean any harm!" Pilaf rushed to bow to the Ox King, forgetful of his own royal
dignity. "We are in fact the bearers of good news."

"That is all ya thieves and scoundrels say." grunted the giant. "Liars, the whole lot of ya. But ya
never say it again after I do my thing."
Shu did not feel like pointing out it would be very unlikely of them to say *anything at all* after he 'did his thing' was the wisest course of action, despite having the urge to.

"My lord," he said, bowing lower than Pilaf, and drawing from all his best servile arts, "my master says only the truth. We have landed far from your palace because we did not want to alarm you; we seek an alliance, not to attack you. We're honoured you managed to come and greet us immediately."

"What he says!" confirmed Pilaf, nodding vigorously, but still never raising his eyes to meet the ones of the Ox King.

"Greet, huh?" the man scratched his beard. "I was just chopping some wood for ma' daughter's bridal bed. Saw ya coming down through the winds, thought ya'd crash. Ya thieves got guts, I'll give ya that."

"Oh, you were chopping wood!" said Pilaf, relieved. "That explains the axe."

"Nah, that's another axe." blurted out the Ox King. "This one's for thieves' necks. Blood makes the blade rusty, ya need a good edge to cut trees around here. Wood's hard as steel."

Pilaf gulped. "How informative."

The axe swung high as the giant man approached. "So. Ya got any last words?"

"Congratulations to your daughter? Who's the, huh, lucky boy?" tried asking Shu. Maybe some thoughts of familiar joy would remove his mind from those of murder.

"There's no boy," said the Ox King, without stopping his advance. "Just thought a good father should think about his daughter's future and all. Putting myself bit ahead with the work. I'm that kind of man."

"That's very thoughtful." whispered Shu, choking.

The axe now was right above their heads, in position to strike.

"Now ya stay still," said the giant "and I can do both yer heads in one clean chop. Ya won't feel a thing. Ya move or try funny things, second one might get only half-sliced, and I tell ya, not a good way to go, that one."

"WE HAVE COME TO ASK YOUR DAUGHTER'S HAND IN MARRIAGE!" screamed Pilaf.

Everything stood still.

The Ox King stared at the intruders, his expression unreadable as his helmet covered his eyes entirely.

Shu and Pilaf, for a long minute or so, almost held their breath, cold sweat dripping down their faces.

Then the Ox King lowered his axe.

"Well that makes things complicated." he grunted. "I never thought about that, but ya'll right, people might come here for that too, not just thievin'."

"Countless tales of her beauty travel the land, and have reached our royal ears!" pushed on Pilaf, hopeful. "And we thought, here, this would be a bride worthy of our royal dignity, and the perfect way to seal the alliance with our longest, most faithful vassal!"
"Royal dignity? Vassal?" the man lowered himself on his knees, and sort of prodded Pilaf with a finger thicker than the poor guy's arm. "Ya a king too or sumthin'?"

"He sure is!" jumped in Shu. "He is the one you and your ancestors long waited for - the last descendant of the Rice dynasty! The one true King, who's come back to take the throne from the Furry usurper."

"I dunno ma' ancestors, but I am not waiting for crap." said the Ox King. "What is this dynasty thing? Ya not a real king then?"

"Technically a prince, we would guess." admitted Pilaf. "As we have not yet been crowned. But we heard that you fend off the emissaries of King Furry. Surely you are not a friend of the current dynasty!"

The man's voice seethed with rage. "Those pests! Ya right I send them away. Them thieves and scoundrels too. Come to take my money, call it 'taxes'. Taxes, figures! This is ma' and ma' family's land. Why do I gotta pay any damned taxes on it?"

Pilaf smiled and got back on his feet, looking at the man in his eyes now. "We fully agree with your fiscal policy. And were we to come to the throne, with your help, and bonded to your family by marriage, we would exempt you from any tributes, and allow you in fact to levy taxes on your own subjects."

"Well, not like I got those any more." mumbled the Ox King. "Since the mountain caught fire, they all left. Just ma' daughter and me now."

"I am sure we could do something about that too. And if you helped us, and I married into your family, you would grow old knowing one of your grandchildren will one day be King!"

"That sounds good." the man stopped a bit suddenly, as if struck by a thought. "Ya not lyin' scoundrels too? Ya sure ya can become King?"

"We have no doubt whatsoever!" said Pilaf. "We only need one thing, and we believe it to be in your treasury."

The Ox King clenched his axe a bit tighter. "That sure as heck sounds like you're up to some thievin'."

"Not at all!" reassured Pilaf, suddenly dropping half the confidence he had just built up. "It is an insignificant part of your many riches, I am sure, and with it, I can grant you your rightful position in my new kingdom. In fact, it is the only thing I will ask for your daughter's dowry. Truly, it is a great deal for you!"

"Ya sound right on that." mumbled the large man, again stroking his beard. "We gotta discuss the arrangement. Come to ma' house, and ya can meet ma' daughter."

It was said that the Ox King's castle was a magnificent thing to behold; a massive, imposing structure, with halls so tall, the ceiling could barely be seen when they were illuminated by candlelight, and pillars so large, it would take three men to hug them in their entirety. None of this, of course, could be seen by Pilaf and Shu, as the castle itself was on top of Mount Frypan, and for ten years the fire had prevented anyone from reaching it. Instead, the King now lived in a cramped house in the village at the foot of the mountain, a building so small he had to bow to pass through the door. Like for all buildings in the area, the side exposed to the fire was blackened with soot and cracked by
the heat. The two followed their host in as he made room for them by pushing stuff aside, shuffling piles of boxes and hoards of weapons through the floor and tossing away bunched up clothes, in a house that looked very little the part of a royal palace.

"Come on in, sit down." the Ox King signalled that the way was free, and carefully, Pilaf and Shu came forward, trying not to step on anything. The three of them sat at a table in a tiny dining room. Their host kept his head slightly tilted on one side to avoid hitting the ceiling. He sat at the table, and finally took off his helmet, revealing a bush of hair as black and unruly as his beard, and two small eyes that almost disappeared in his massive head.

"The heat burns ya throat round here!" he said loudly. "Ya gotta have something to drink."

"That would please us very much, yes." said Pilaf, while Shu merely nodded.

The Ox King turned around, grabbed a barrel full of water as tall as a man, and smashed it on the table.

"Have as much as ya want!" he proclaimed gleefully. Pilaf and Shu looked at each other perplexed, then climbed on the table, trying to get some water by forming cups with their hands. The Ox King simply dove head first into the barrel, guzzling down almost half of it with grand production of gurgling noises. This lowered the level of the water so much it became impossible to reach for either of the other two without risking to fall inside, so they just gave up altogether and pretended to be satisfied.

When the Ox King decided everyone had had enough, the conversation proper started.

"So, this plan ya have to become king. Tell me about it!"

"Well, we can not tell you everything right now," explained Pilaf, "but thing is, there are certain... items, which we believe will grant their owner any wish. We are in possession of all of them except one, which we have reason to think is in your treasury."

"Ah, the Dragon Balls!" the Ox King laughed. "Thought that was just a legend. Good for ya! But I don't got 'em."

Pilaf and Shu exchanged a worried look.

"Are you sure?" Shu insisted. "We located the Ball exactly in the middle of the mountain."

"Ah, that. Well, ya know." the man started scratching the back of his neck, thoughtful "I might have one in the castle. I don't keep count of that stuff, haven't seen it in ten years. But what ya gonna do? The mountain's on fire, no one can get up there."

Pilaf waved his hand, dismissively. "No need to worry about that. I'm sure Shu can figure out a way."

Hearing this, his companion, or subject, started flashing rapidly between being embarrassed and alarmed. It looked like a dozen different objections were fighting their way up his throat to try and reach his mouth; and after a while, their match must have resolved in a draw, because all Shu ended up doing was emitting a choking sound, shut back up, and have a kind of a nervous twitch.

The Ox King scrutinised him during this whole process. "Ya say he can, huh?" he mumbled without much enthusiasm. "Well, if ya manage to get there, the Ball is yers alright! I would be very happy to get ma' castle back, ya know."
"I do not think I can guarantee that much." said Shu starting forward, to then hunch back in his place. "But I'll try."

"Well, that's just great! Ya know what, I will go get ma' daughter, so ya can meet and start getting along."

After saying so, the giant man got up from the table, picked up the axe that he had left next to his seat, and left, lowering his head to pass through the comparatively tiny door. His steps got less and less loud as he got further away.

"Boss, I can't do that!" screamed Shu, as soon as they couldn't hear them any more.

Pilaf looked back at him with a hint of annoyance.

"It's 'Your Majesty', Shu." he said. "Just because we are outside of the castle and we have barely escaped death by decapitation it does not mean you are allowed to break etiquette."

The other hung his head, ashamed. "I'm sorry."

"Well, we can understand it was force of habit from our days before we knew of our ancestry. You are forgiven." Pilaf put a hand on his subject's shoulder. "And for the Dragon Ball, we have full trust in you. Before our quest started, you were already our most trusted engineer, and we were never once disappointed by your abilities. And now you have all resources that our royal means can currently put at your disposition available to solve this problem!"

Shu's eyes did not get much brighter. "You mean the two caches of equipment we managed to load and take with us before leaving?"

Pilaf nodded solemnly. "All resources."

The dog sighed. While the situation was all kinds of unusual - what with the possibly not completely avoided threat of death by decapitation and the imminent axe-facilitated political marriage - this, at least, sounded like a very familiar script to him. One that he had gone through many times, back in those simpler days in which Pilaf was simply his boss and not his king, usually managing to pull through not too shabbily.

"I'll give it a shot, bo... I mean, Your Majesty." he sighed, finally.

"Good! We leave the success of this enterprise in your hands."

They fell in silence as they heard booming steps came back, and get gradually closer. Finally, the door was slammed open by the Ox King's hand, large almost as much as it. Before entering, he pushed in a little girl, probably twelve years old or so, wearing an incredibly skimpy bikini, and with a weird bladed helmet on her head.

"Come on, Chichi, say hello to our guests." said the Ox King. The girl barely managed to squeak a feeble 'hello' before blushing and running back to her father to hide behind one of his trunk-like legs out of sheer embarrassment.

"Why, hello, little one!" said Pilaf, attempting a friendly, non-scary smile with little success. "Is your big sister coming to meet us too?"

The Ox King looked at him and scratched his head in puzzlement.

"What sister ya talking about?" he asked.
While Pilaf was engaged in talks with his future father-in-law about a marriage arrangement that seemed to get more insane by the minute, Shu was granted some time on his own, to begin planning the Dragon Ball recovery operation. A moment of respite that he sorely needed - everything that was being discussed depended on this. Without the Dragon Ball, Pilaf had no reason to tie himself to the Ox King, and the Ox King, perhaps, had no reason to leave them alive. Except any sympathy that they may have managed to elicit in him thanks to their natural charm, but Shu was not in the habit of relying on that too much. In fact, he was not in the habit of relying on any kind of stroke of luck at all. He had learned to expect, not necessarily the worst possible scenario, but at the very least the most likely bad scenario, which turned out to be usually spot on when it came to his job.

Unfortunately, that also made him the sort of person that you would not usually drag around in a globe throttling adventure full of deadly dangers, as his usual approach to those had always been to never come close to them in the first place. For some reason however Pilaf had seen fit picking him, of all his employees, when he had decided to upgrade his status from capitalist to monarch. Shu had felt obliged to accept out of friendship, but now he started really doubting his choice. He cursed the moment he had mentioned the weekly community centre ninjutsu course he attended for the sake of cracking a bit his squeaky joints, in a bit of water cooler talk. It seemed to have given Pilaf weird ideas about the level of martial prowess he could contribute to the whole enterprise.

With a sigh, Shu put aside those thoughts and focused on the problem at hand. Pilaf and the Ox King had left him the kitchen, so he had a chance to brew himself some coffee to relax and start thinking. The information he had available was not much. At some point, ten years ago, Mount Frypan had caught fire. The stories mentioned some kind of 'spirit' that had fallen from the sky, but he doubted this was how things really went. Even if magic was a thing, after all, this sounded a bit improbable to Shu - he suspected the triggering event might have been a small burning meteorite. Still, the effect did not change much. The mountain was on fire, its flanks had been scorched of all vegetation, which had only fuelled the gigantic pyre, and now its temperature was permanently above anything humans could withstand, which made its summit entirely unapproachable. Reaching the castle was out of the question, on foot or by air. Part of the issue was of course also that the huge fire would create strong ascending currents, making landing on the summit absolutely impossible.

There was no obvious way of putting out the fire, so Shu started thinking about what caused it and kept it going. To burn for so long, the mountain must obviously provide some source of fuel. The most common possibility would be some sort of hydrocarbon seeping through the rock, or a coal deposit just under the surface.Luckily, among the few tools he had managed to bring with him, he had a portable device for air quality analysis. It was nothing too precise, but it gave him a fair idea of what was in the air surrounding the mountain; some carbon monoxide, some aromatic compounds, and some sulphur ones, which confirmed more or less his theory. The large amounts of soot that could be found deposited everywhere in the town also reinforced the hypothesis that it was really coal burning under Mount Frypan, as any and all trees had long gone from its sides.

So, landing on top safely would require basically putting out the entire mountain, and putting out the entire mountain was fundamentally impossible, unless they asked the dragon to do it, obviously; but first, that would have been a grave waste of one magical wish, and second, it was not possible to do it without retrieving the Dragon Ball. Wait a moment, was it? There were not specific indications in the legends they'd read about the distance the Dragon Balls had to be from each other in order to be considered 'gathered' enough by whatever magic animated them to allow for summoning the dragon. Perhaps bringing all six Dragon Balls in a plane above the castle and hovering a few dozen metres over the seventh could do the trick? Shu discarded the idea quickly, though. It could be tried if all else failed, but it was unlikely to work - any reasonable human intuition about what it means to 'gather' seven small items would involve bunching them all up in less than a metre of radius, and it was unlikely that whatever magical being who had created them would think differently. Even if it
were possible, that would result in summoning the dragon in an extremely precarious position, and it was unclear what the fire could do to it, or what it could do to the plane.

Discard landing on top, then. Was it possible to recover the Dragon Ball without landing? Well, one could rope down a single person from a helicopter (the plane they drove to the mountain had a convenient ability to rotate its jets and switch to a hovering mode, in fact), and then after they grabbed the Dragon Ball pull them back up. With a search radius of ten metres approximately, owing to the precision of the radar, they hopefully could do it in a few seconds, and with enough heat resistant equipment, and possibly a few consecutive 'dives', there may be a chance. Shu pulled a calculator and ran a quick estimate of the heat involved, but even with decent heat-resistant equipment (which they didn't have), right now no one probably could survive at the top of the mountain for more than a few seconds. The entire area was literally on fire, it would be like diving inside a furnace. Not to mention, you had to search the castle, and that meant moving inside a maze of rooms, corridors and doors. Not only it ought to take longer, it probably meant you couldn't even be roped out in an emergency.

If only the fire could be quenched for a while in an area surrounding the castle, then that may give a window to act. A usual way to do something like that would be to use a powerful explosive charge - powerful enough, probably, to also demolish the castle, but that may be agreed upon with the Ox King. He had done without it for ten years, he could do without it until Pilaf became King and could give him pretty much any residence he wanted. The shockwave from the explosion should push away the surrounding air fast enough to temporarily stop the fire, and then it would take time for it to spread again to the summit. Not much time, granted, but enough to find and retrieve the Dragon Ball. But an explosion of that size would have required a few tons of dynamite, which not only they did not have with them at the moment - they just didn't have at all. Even scraping every bit of explosive and gunpowder back at the castle, all they could get together was probably a few kilograms of the stuff. As for the things they had with them now, nothing came close to being able to produce those amounts of energy; just a bag of electronic components, three of his surveillance drones, measurement instruments, various tools, two laptops, some other assorted junk, and the storage capsules they all came packed in.

The engineer's eyes lingered over these items, all laid in front of him, and suddenly an idea sprung into his mind. He thought about it, and the more he thought about it, the more it made sense. In fact he seemed to remember reading that it had been done in the past, though it wasn't usual practice mostly for how expensive and wasteful it would be. But expense and waste weren't constraints here - time and a very threatening broadaxe were.

Shu bolted up and ran out of the room.

...and, well, you understand that we assumed your daughter was of marriageable age, since you mentioned something about a bridal bed." Pilaf was explaining, as apologetic as he could possibly sound.

The Ox King frowned. "I told ya I was putting myself ahead with the work. Did ya really hear about ma' daughter before?"

"Of course!" the other rushed to answer. "Of course I have. The famous Chibi..."

"Chichi." corrected the little girl with a small voice, sitting in a corner as she was, flushed by either embarrassment or shyness.

"...Chichi, of Mount Frypan. It's just that the accounts were so stunning, we assumed no girl could
possibly get this beautiful without even hitting puberty first..."

To this, Chichi’s face only veered even further towards bright red.

"Hmm. Well, ya'll marry when she's of age of course, in six years." grunted her father. "We just need to stipulate the contract. For safety."

The gigantic axe was leaning on his side, resting on the floor, ready to be picked up at a moment's notice.

"Of course." agreed Pilaf. "But first, we would like to hear our would be bride speak her mind. Six years are a long time, and this is a very important commitment for both of us. We would not want her to be, uh, displeased or disappointed by the arrangement later on."

"Why would she be! She gets to be Queen. Chichi, ya like the prince, don't ya? I told ya I'd get ya married to one one day. Like in the fairy tales and stuff."

Chichi looked at Pilaf long and hard, resisting her own impulse to just lower her eyes and be generally embarrassed. Her education as sort-of-royalty did show after all. She looked at Pilaf up and down, searching his features - from the brightly coloured skullcap, to the pointy ears, to the protruding brow - for anything that even remotely matched her own fairy tale-induced ideas of princely qualities.

"Well," she finally said, politely but with a rather unenthused voice, "he's blue."

"He is, right?" the Ox King laughed loudly. "They say nobles have blue blood, he sure shows it!"

Pilaf giggled along uncomfortably and silently hoped for deliverance.

Which, unexpectedly, arrived, in the form of Shu slamming the door open with a bang.

"Your Majesty!" he said, excitedly. "I know what to do."

———

The drones were so small that they couldn't be seen with the naked eye at their distance, but still, Pilaf and the Ox King stared at the empty sky above Mount Frypan, squinting, and occasionally swearing they had seen a movement or a black speck against the backdrop of the sky, amidst the rising smoke. The Ox King had put back his helmet - turns out it wasn't just meant to look menacing, the binocular-like prongs covering his eyes were in fact glasses, as he was shortsighted. This made the likelihood of him spotting those drones even more insignificant, but did not seem to discourage him.

Shu, more pragmatically, was piloting the things by looking in a tiny screen on his controller that showed a first person view taken from one of the cameras they carried. It was blurry and low resolution but you could make out the mountain, the raging fire and the clouds of rising smoke, and the towers of the castle. Once he was sure the drones were hovering above approximately the right spot, he started having them ascend. As soon as they were more than one kilometre high above the ground, this made any already small chance that they could be seen from the ground vanish, and he said as much. Pilaf at the very least stopped looking up for a while.

"Can they really go that high, Shu?" he asked, coming close. "We would not like to imagine how he would react if..."

"They can, Your Majesty," reassured him the dog, "they're not cheap store-bought models. I built
them to have the same range as a normal plane. But the problem is keeping them exactly above the castle."

He kept pushing them back and forth in small course corrections as they ascended, to compensate for the push of the wind, using their accelerometers to keep consistently track of their position. When he felt pretty sure that they had ascended high enough that the atmosphere would be quieter, and the autopilot could be relied upon, he locked it in, and invited Pilaf to follow him in their plane.

"Where ya going?" asked the Ox King.

"To recover the Dragon Ball." he answered. "The window of time may be very small, so we can't afford to be still on the ground when the castle is hit. By the way," he added, "sorry again for any, uhm, damages."

"Don't ya worry." the giant made a dismissive hand wave. "Hadn't used that in ten years, lived just fine without."

"Right."

Pilaf and Shu mounted both on the plane. Given the extreme lack of manpower, Pilaf had acknowledged that even his own help was necessary, despite the task not being too worthy of a king. They avoided to dwell on it too much. Shu drove the plane to an altitude that put it a decent distance above the mountain's summit, then turned it to helicopter mode and left the control stick to Pilaf. He checked the position of the drones on his remote, double and triple checked just to be sure, since they only had one shot at this and this aspect of it was actually really sort of nerve-wracking considering their whole situation. All his engineer instincts screamed that stuff like this needed to be tested before you bet the success of your entire current project, and possibly your life, on it. But circumstances were what they were, and that would need to do.

Shu pressed the button.

Way above their heads, and a bit forward, at almost twelve kilometres of altitude, the actuators Shu had mounted on his drones clicked, pushing multiple buttons on as many capsules. An instant later the capsules burst in a puff of smoke, completely blowing away the drones, and freeing their whole content. Fifty tons of rocks each, loaded quickly thanks to the herculean strength of the Ox King inside the storage tanks, the mass limit for capsules of that class, three hundred tons total, were now in free fall, in a straight line above the castle.

"Will they hit?" asked Pilaf, nervous.

"Almost certainly," said Shu, who had retrieved a pair of binoculars and was now checking the sky. "since they're way too heavy, and will be way too fast, for the wind to move them significantly off target. I tried to compensate a bit for what I could anyway, but they won't be precise. They should still hit around the summit of the mountain anyway. The chance of any straying as far as we are is very low."

"There is a chance?" squeaked the other, horrified.

"An insignificantly tiny one, Your Majesty. I would never risk your safety."

They held their breaths as they waited for the rocks to become visible. Considering that at some point they would reach terminal velocity, it should have taken a bit under a minute for the improvised bombs to hit.

"Here they come."
They hit. It was a massive detonation, but from afar it did not shake the plane much. The castle however seemed to explode spontaneously, hit by projectiles falling too fast to be easily spotted by human eye. The towers crumbled on themselves, the walls ruined towards the outside. The terrain itself was blown to bits; a cloud of dust rose from each impact point, and hot fragments of burning coal were projected like a fountain all around. But the important thing was that it worked. When the dust started to settle, it was obvious that the summit of the mountain wasn't a burning hellscape any more; it was merely surrounded by a burning hellscape. Which also meant it would not stay that way for long.

"Your Majesty should pilot the plane right above that spot," Shu had started grabbing a heat resistant suit and the rope to hook it, "while I get in gear."

"Eh? Eh? Uh, sure, okay." Pilaf shook himself from a moment of stupor and started pushing the craft forward.

Now the raging inferno was below them, and piloting was made increasingly harder by the ascending currents. Good thing was, they didn't need to land. Well, good for the pilot - Shu was beginning to breaking out in a cold sweat at the thought of what he was about to do, even amidst all the heat. He finished zipping the suit, put on a backpack oxygen tank, a mask and a helmet (no guarantee that the air would be breathable down there, with how much oxygen must have been eaten up by the fire) and walked to the open hatch, the ruins of the castle just under his foot, and fire all around. They were positioned right above where the Ox King had said the treasure room was - in fact, even from here, Shu could see the glint of gold and gems occasionally peering amidst the smoke and rubble.

"Are you ready?" asked Pilaf, struggling to keep control of the plane.

"No." answered Shu, but then a sudden current violently shook the aircraft, and down the hatch he was anyway. He fell quickly, but as his rope unwound, the winch prevented him from going so quickly that he'd smash into the ground. He descended steadily and finally touched ground on the ruins of the treasury. Now that he was here, his paralysis that prevented him from leaving the relative safety of the plane had gone; all he wanted was to finish quickly and go back to it. He pulled out a small blocky device he had rigged together some time ago, finally having a chance to test it. It was a bit the complement of their usual radar - it should give him a much better idea of where the Dragon Ball was, but could only work at an extremely short range. Which was where he expected it to be here, so when the thing started blipping intermittently, faster or slower depending on the direction he walked in, it didn't come as too much of a surprise. It took a few minutes of following it around in this treasure hunt for Shu to be confident he was in the right spot; and sure enough, as soon as he moved a few pieces of ceiling, he found the Ball, an orange shiny sphere that could have passed for just another gem in the middle of all the other treasure.

Shu turned the detector off; it had been incredibly helpful, but now that he would carry the ball near it at all times it would merely turn into a very annoying alarm. It was a pity he never made two of them, or Mai would have found it extremely useful too, looking for the hidden Dragon Balls left by Bulma and her friend in their room. But it was more important to have it in this situation - in fact, without it, it would have been hard to find anything at all. The smoke and dark dust made visibility rather poor all around.

In fact, it was even worse than he expected it would be. The dust was outright black.

At which point, Shu realised what was happening, remembered why is it exactly that you test ideas before betting your life on them, and desperately tugged the rope in the pattern that meant I found the Dragon Ball, pull me out of here FAST.
One second later, his rope was winding up, sweeping him off the ground and pulling him speedily into the air, right towards the plane, as if he was being spirited to heaven by a very impatient god.

Three more seconds later, the cloud of coal dust that had been raised when the ground had been smashed and cratered by a hail of high-velocity rocks, and had somehow managed to survive until then, finally ignited due to some stray spark. The blast was so violent the plane was rocked back and forth, and Shu felt the heat below his feet, even through his protective equipment, and feared he'd catch fire. He didn't, but the summit of the mountain did. As they left in a hurry, Mount Frypan went back to its previous state as an unquenchable, unapproachable mountain of fire.

Shu ripped his helmet off. He was laying on the floor of the plane, breathing heavily, the Dragon Ball clutched in his right hand, covered in sweat both hot and cold.

"Boss," he whined, "I want a pay rise."

Pilaf threw a disapproving look initially, and looked like he was about to say something, but then kept himself in check.

"We agree," he answered finally, "we believe you deserved it."

The celebrations for the success of the mission were many and very loud. The Ox King was overjoyed, and had pulled the dinner table out of his house to have a feast in the open. His booming laughter and enthusiastic descriptions of their joint future as great allies and friends, of the new castle he was going to build at the foot of the mountain, and of the wedding ceremony between his daughter and the newly crowned King Pilaf he was planning to hold first thing in its Great Hall to inaugurate it kept resonating across the landscape, drowning the constant background provided by the roaring flames. Pilaf joined him in a display of diplomatic pleasantries, despite getting sort of antsy whenever the whole 'marriage' topic was brought up. Shu ate whatever the Ox King saw fit to offer his guests, and for the rest mostly laid back somewhere trying to recover from the terror and exhaustion of this very long day. Chichi politely attended the reception as was expected of her, but mostly kept spacing out and staring in the distance.

It did not seem like anything could possibly ruin the mood. Least of all, the ring of a phone coming from Pilaf's plane.

"That must be Mai informing us that she found all the other Dragon Balls!" Pilaf exclaimed, beaming. "Shu, go fetch her call, and put it up on a speaker for us all to hear!"

Shu grumbled a bit - sheer tiredness seemed to have worn out his patience for royal etiquette a lot - but in the end he dragged himself to the plane. Sure enough, the call came from Mai's phone. He pushed a couple of buttons to answer and put it on the plane's main speaker.

"Hello? Can you hear me?"

Both Pilaf and Shu froze. That was not Mai's voice. In fact, it was eerily similar to another voice they had heard very recently.

"Good evening!" said the voice, cheerfully. "This is Bulma Briefs talking - and boy, do I have a good deal to offer you..."
The phone was silent now, producing only the occasional scratching sound, but Shu and Pilaf were still staring at it, transfixed as if it had just transmitted the voice of a wandering ghost.

"Is that yer friend, Pilaf?" asked the Ox King, putting down his huge mug of beer.

"Most certainly not!" snapped back Pilaf, and then, loudly enough that the microphones would catch his words, "She is a treacherous wench who abused our trust, and whose day of reckoning will eventually come! No punishment shall be enough to satisfy our righteous anger at this knave."

A giggle came from the speakers. "Keep dreaming, pipsqueak." Both Shu and the Ox King gasped in horror at the sheer disrespect. "You had your chance, and you lost it. I'm not going to make the mistake of giving you another. Any guesses as to why I am calling you from this phone?"

Silence fell on the scene, as the answer to that was way too obvious, and none too pleasant.

"What did you do to Mai?" finally asked Pilaf.

"She's fine, don't worry. We're not criminals. Unlike some other people hunting for the Dragon Balls these days, you know. She's just bound and gagged - we captured her after she barged into our base and tried to attack us."

"Lies! Mai was ordered to stay in the castle, and she's a loyal, trusted subject of ours who would never..."

"Uploading photo now." said Bulma, bored.

Pilaf ran to the plane, where the phone was physically located. Shu was staring at the screen already and nervously biting his thumb.

A picture had just arrived. It showed Mai tied to a chair, with a gag in her mouth, just as Bulma had said. She was awake and her eyes looked definitely extremely angry, but she did not struggle. Next to her was the boy with a monkey tail, the one who Bulma had brought along to the dinner at the castle but never said a word. Shu, having experienced his strength first hand, was not too surprised at Mai's lack of resistance. She must have realised with him keeping guard there was absolutely no point to it.

"So, I expect you to believe me now." continued Bulma.
Pilaf was struggling to put together a coherent sentence. "But when... how... why?"

"This afternoon, with only a few weapons and a lot of guts, and heck if I know." answered the other. "Spared us a lot of trouble, actually, since I was struggling to come up with a good plan to get my hands on the Dragon Ball you just nicked from the Ox King. Good job on that, by the way! You need to tell me how you did it."

The would be king emitted something like a choking noise. Shu reached to the console, pushed a button muting the loudspeaker, then grabbed the microphone. When Pilaf looked at him puzzlingly, he signed to wait, and let him handle this - with a small bow of the head for added courtesy.

"Shu here." he introduced himself, with a bit of a weak voice. "I will continue the negotiations on His Majesty's behalf."

"Shu?" Bulma paused for a bit, thinking. "Oh, right, the little clever guy. When this whole affair blows over, send a CV to us at Capsule Corporation. We have real use for talent, you know."

"I'm, uhm, lusingated by the offer." Pilaf shot him a deadly stare. "But also gravely offended that you would try to sway my undying loyalty to His Majesty's cause." he hurried to add.

"Well, I had to try. The offer is always valid."

"You said you, uh, had no plan. But now you have one?"

"Well, of course. You will give us the Dragon Ball, in exchange for Mai."

Shu frowned. "And what if we, uhm, don't agree? Will you hurt her?"

"My, no. We will just hand her to the police. We have footage of her attacking us, and we also have a few other interesting stories to tell about you guys. I'm sure enough evidence to warrant an investigation from the royal secret services."

At this point, Pilaf was sweating cold. The Ox King joined them, but he still wasn't really getting what was going on. Chichi diligently walked at his side, equally clueless.

"If you won't hurt her," said Shu, slowly, "what stops us from just using the Dragon Balls and having Pilaf become King right away? At which point he can simply pardon her."

"Shu, don't give ideas to the malcontent!" shrieked Pilaf, but the phone paused for a few seconds.

Finally, Bulma spoke again. "If I don't remember badly, Mai damaged the door to your treasure room when she captured me. That means you need to go back from Mount Frypan to your castle, then crack into the vault, and recover the Dragon Ball before you can make your wish, and that's if you already found our five. All we need to do is go to the police in the nearby village. An accusation of high treason guarantees an emergency direct line to the King's office, and there's a Royal Defence Force base within a couple hours of flight from your castle. Are you ready to take that bet?"

"Give us one minute to discuss this." Shu muted the microphone on their side and turned to the others. "I don't think this, uhm, sounds like a sure plan for her. But it's a risk. She's saying the truth about the army base, at least. And opening that door will be hard, and we don't know if Mai found the other five Balls before leaving."

"What was she thinking!" Pilaf was pacing back and forth, in anger, randomly shaking his fists for seconds at a time. "Now we're in trouble because of her."
"A King that don't protect his subjects," proudly said the Ox King, "is no King at all."

"Sure, sure." said Pilaf. "But what should we do? We can't throw everything away now!"

"She said she thinks we 'nicked' the Ball from the Ox King." intervened Shu. "It makes sense, she saw it moving from Mount Frypan on her radar, but she doesn't know we allied with him. Your Majesty..."

Pilaf turned his head.

"...not Your Majesty, the other one..."

The Ox King followed suit.

"...this woman has a very strong fellow with her. I saw him smash through a coconut shell with a single finger without breaking a sweat. Do you think you would have a chance against him?"

The other's roaring laughter was almost earth-shaking. "What do ya take me for, little ninja? I can beat that nobody like it's nothin'. I trained under the great Muten Roshi, the strongest martial artist there is! I was his second best pupil!"

Shu frowned. "How many of you there were?"

"Two." answered the giant man. "Why?"

The other sighed. "Never mind. You do look quite strong. So..."

"Not another word, lad!" the Ox King grinned ferociously. "I know what ya mean. We'll go find these thieves of yours, and I'll get some rust off my axe. Ya get what I'm sayin'?"

Shu's back was coursed by a shiver. It was unsettling to unleash this fury on someone else, when he had feared for his life being on the bad end of it just a few hours earlier. Still, it was a plan. Possibly even a good one.

"Then, with your permission, King Pilaf, we will agree with a rendez-vous point with Bulma to give her the Dragon Ball. I will take the plane and go back to the castle, while you and the Ox King go meet them. And well, you need to just free Mai, and buy me some time to retrieve the Balls."

"That sounds like a... really good plan." approved Pilaf. "Go ahead."

"Ya don't need to worry!" the Ox King laughed. "We won't just buy time. I'll throw in a few heads into that dowry of yers!"

Chichi, next to him, tugged gently at his leg to draw his attention.

"Oh, right." he scratched his beard. "Can't bring ma' daughter along though, wouldn't want her see all that, ya know, she's impressionable and all. Can I leave her with ya?"

Shu was a bit taken aback. "It's a great responsibility, Your Majesty, but sure. You can trust me with her life."

The other laughed. "Oh, I don't worry about that. She knows how to take care of herself, she can kick yer ass alright! Just keep her entertained so she doesn't get bored while daddy's working."

The ninja sighed. Of course she was a monster too. Guess that weird blade on her helmet wasn't just for show. It did look uncomfortably sharp.
"Is that okay with you, princess?" he asked. The little girl nodded.

"Let's do it then." Shu said. "Give me one minute."

He went back to the phone, re-opened the conversation, and accepted all of Bulma's conditions. A meeting place was agreed upon, at a certain distance north of the mountain. It would take some time to get there, but as it turned out, the Ox King had a car that could take them there in less than a dozen hours. That was not as fast as the plane Pilaf and Shu had come with, but it was perfect, as it would give him more time to go back to the castle and search. They didn't mention any of this to Bulma of course - just lied about their original means of transportation and time of arrival. They agreed to meet the next day. Given the urgency of the matter, the Ox King insisted that they waste no time (his exact words involved something about his axe being thirsty for blood), and him and Pilaf immediately took the car and drove off into the distance.

Shu was left alone with Chichi, who was staring at him up and down - especially his ears and tail.

"We have to go too." he said, suddenly. "Is something the matter, princess?"

She said nothing, but looked a bit restless, clutching her hands and shrugging.

The dog tried a smile. "You can tell me. I will not get angry or anything, whatever it is."

"Mr. Shu," she finally said, looking at him with shining eyes, "you look very fluffy. Can I pet you?"

She had zoomed through the perimeter. The base was protected by motion sensors, easily planted in the terrain, but no defences. Could she have sneaked through instead, kept the advantage of surprise? Unlikely, and it was the middle of the day - had she taken too long, she would have been spotted anyway. For the same reason, attacking from a distance wouldn't have done much good either - all they needed to do was grab their Dragon Balls and run, they had no reason to fight her.

She went in ready to the idea that shooting the boy would not kill him - but still, it would hurt him and slow him down, so it was a tactical option. She just had not to rely on him going down permanently. Of course, since the sensors had rung the alarms, the boy would get the jump on her. That was expected. It was about taking him out, there and then, and she could have just done whatever she wanted.

But the boy had expected it too. He knew the gun would hurt him, and avoided being hit. One bullet he sent back - hell, it ricocheted on his skin - and Mai was so surprised she got grazed. But she kept firing in a pattern that would force the boy to keep his distance. They were fighting inside the house, and the kid was trying to keep her at bay while not damaging the room and furniture - guess he was worried about his little girlfriend getting angry - and that was really too much, he would have to make a mistake while balancing so much. She had managed to corner him using her guns and then a swift kick to the solar plexus, he was back to the wall, no immediate way to escape, right in time - three seconds earlier, preparing for this instant, she had pulled the pin of a grenade. She threw it. It should have been over.

And yet the boy had simply adjusted his speed and kicked the grenade to explode out of the window, all so damn fast she didn't even see the movement. Next, the punch had her bent over, and she let her weapon fall. She was tied, gagged, photographed, taken as a hostage.

All Mai could think about, through the rage and humiliation, was that fight. Play it again and again in her mind. What could she have done differently, what would have made her win.
For the first time in her life, she hated the answer that stared at her with mocking eyes: *nothing at all.*

He was too strong. She could never win, not in a hundred, a thousand, a million different scenarios. He was too far above.

Unable to move or talk, she only raised her eyes at the kid, that clueless kid who was guarding her with an air of innocence about him. She looked at him with pure, unadulterated hate. *I will defeat you. And I will kill you.*

"You were strong," suddenly said Goku, as if he both could read Mai's mind, and was unable to understand her feelings at all, "possibly the strongest I've fought yet besides my grandpa."

That little *fucker.*

"On guard, Goku!" called Bulma. She was checking the horizon with a pair of binoculars just a few metres away. "I see a car. They're coming."

Goku walked up to Bulma, shielded his eyes from the sun, trying to peer in the same direction. There was a cloud of dust where the car was racing, but making up the occupants was difficult.

"I think I see someone big." he commented. "Neither of them should be big."

"Wait a second... yes, you're right, there's a proper *mountain* of a man in that car, no wonder it's a convertible, he wouldn't have fit in a normal one. Ok, no, he's not in the car any more, he jumped down..."

Bulma paled.

"He's running towards us, and he's *faster than the damn car!* And he's got a weapon, and a horned helmet! Goku, I read the stories, that's the Ox King!"

Goku extracted his pole and entered a combat stance. The giant enemy was now less than one kilometre away, and quickly eating up that distance.

"How did they get him on board?" the girl lowered the binoculars now, he was close enough to see with the naked eye, "Goku, *you can beat him,* right?"

The boy had a deadly serious expression. His eyes were focused, his body tensed up like a bowstring before the shot.

"I don't know," he muttered, "he's running as fast as I would. Bulma, you'd better withdraw. I can't worry about hurting you if I need to win this."

Bulma walked a few steps back, then turned around. "What if you lose?"

"Then I'm afraid it won't matter either way." he concluded matter-of-factly.

Hearing Goku speak that way was definitely a sign that things were extremely serious, she decided. Her brilliant plan was about to backfire spectacularly. Bulma ran to Mai, and pulled her up from the chair - her legs were tied loosely, so she could walk, at least - and ordered the woman to follow her, at gunpoint, to a far enough area in the opposite direction with respect to the one from which the enemy was arriving. Mai obeyed without resistance, but purposefully took her sweet time walking even more slowly than her bonds required. Bulma cursed her inability to do more than that, but she didn't want to get too much on Goku's bad side, since he had been very adamant about what he considered to be fair treatment for a prisoner. If he went down, though, she resolved she would not
have a second thought taking Mai outright hostage to save her life if it came to it. He wouldn't be able to complain at that point, anyway.

"YER DEAD!" roared a voice that would have been even deeper if not for the Doppler effect due to how fast its source was coming closer; and one moment later, a giant axe slammed into the ground right were Goku was.

Good thing, he wasn't there any more. Neither, basically, was the ground, as the strike disintegrated the bedrock itself up to a good metre of depth, leaving a crater in its wake. The kid had jumped sideways, and pushed himself against a nearby rock, towards the Ox King, aiming carefully at the shoulder of the arm that was holding his axe - in a blind spot his weapon couldn't reach. It would have been a potentially incapacitating blow, but the man didn't fall for it, and raised his left hand to meet Goku's feet, fingers open, to grab his legs. But Goku did not just gain forward momentum from his push earlier - he had gained spin, too. He grabbed the giant finger in front of him and pivoted up, towards his head. A well-placed kick hit the man's helmet, and sent him recoiling back one metre, but did not do any further damage. Goku pulled back quickly and landed on his feet, at a safe distance, catching his breath a bit.

The Ox King growled, as the helmet had been dented and turned around by the hit, and he now couldn't see anything as his oculars weren't well positioned any more. He ripped it off his head with his free hand and threw it to the ground. Then turned around to watch Goku.

"Yer a strong kid," he said, raising his axe again, "where'd ya learn to fight like that?"

There was no room in Goku's mind for distractions, so it's not like he chose not to answer - he barely heard the question, registered it as irrelevant to the immediate needs of combat, and put it aside. His opponent was strong and resistant, but also somewhat slow both in body and in mind. That was an opening he could exploit. He remembered something his grandfather would say - that the human eye usually could barely discern movement as fast as half the time it takes to blink, the rest was all your head trying to figure out what happened in between. So he started running around. Jumping in irregular patterns, but with fixed points he would return to and stay in for a long enough time that the image ought to impress itself in the brute's retinas - just before zooming around, and reaching another spot, and another, and another, and repeating the game.

"I got ya!" said his enemy, and he swung his axe in a large arc, hitting Goku - except it wasn't Goku at all, just the illusion of his presence. The axe seemed to him like it was passing right through a ghost. His inertia led him to spin around, and then he saw the real Goku, and he reacted, sure he could recover his balance before he would get in range to hit him, but the kid waved his stick and screamed.

"Stick, get longer!"

The pole extended itself suddenly, and now Goku was in range, much faster than anticipated. It hit the Ox King violently between neck and shoulder. Threw him off, even - but again, it did barely any damage at all to his massive body. Yet, even without suffering much from the hit, the man stopped, as if stunned, and stared at Goku and his magic stick.

"Did ya get that stick from someone called Son Gohan?" he asked.

The name managed to get Goku's attention. "Yes," he answered, "he gave it to me. How could you guess?"

The Ox King frowned. "That makes no sense. He would not give it to just some kid. Tell the truth, ya stole it!"
"I do not steal stuff." replied Goku back, with a tinge of annoyance. "He gave it to me and taught me how to use it when teaching me how to fight. He thought I would need it more than him because I was the one who went hunting the most. He was my grandpa, though I know at least I was adopted by him, so I might as well have called him my father. Did you know him?"

The other blinked in disbelief. "Yer Gohan's adopted son? Of all the things... but it makes sense, it makes sense! I see his teachings in the way ya fight! Always a smart one, he was, always tricking me, and ya too..."

"If you wish," continued the kid, "I can give you information I could only possibly know if I did truly live with him to convince you. For example, when he bathed I always noticed he had a scar on his left thigh. It looked like a cut, but it was healed pretty nicely."

The Ox King relaxed completely and broke into laughter. "Boy, this axe gave him that scar! Bit of a drunken scuffle, nothing serious, we were just having some good fun. That is news to me! Ya gotta know, me and Gohan were both disciples of this master, the best martial artist there is, Muten Roshi..."

"Would that be a bald old man with a turtle shell on his back?" suggested Goku, raising an eyebrow.

"The very same! Ya know him too? World's really small, I tell ya. Heck, if I knew ya could have found him, perhaps he coulda done a better job with ma' castle. Well, that's that now. I spent the best years of ma' life with ya grandpa! We were great friends."

Goku was about to point out that it was funny Son Gohan had never mentioned him instead, but didn't get to before Pilaf finally reached the scene with the car, braking down right next to them. "Ox King! What is going on?"

"Ah, Pilaf, ya wouldn't guess! This kid is the adopted son of ma' old comrade, who studied martial arts with me!"

"Fascinating." grumbled the imp. "And this changes the situation how?"

"Well, I can't right kill him, ya see. Out of respect." the man scratched his beard. "But they still have yer friend. Say, kid, wouldn't ya maybe let her go?"

"It is not only up to me," said Goku, calmly sheathing his stick, "but even if it were, I don't know if I would do it. I still do not believe letting you gather the Dragon Balls and become king would be a good idea."

"Why? Ya want to become king instead?"

"Far from it. I am simply unconvinced of this individual's suitability as a ruler."

"That would be 'His Majesty' for you." grumbled Pilaf under his breath.

"No, it wouldn't," rebutted Goku, "at least not until you're officially crowned."

Pilaf went back to mumbling complaints, but soon his disdain found a far better (and less scary) target. Bulma was slowly coming forward, with Mai in tow, as she realised that the entire situation seemed to be aimed for a non-violent resolution.

"You!" he screamed, running up to her. "You peasant! You traitor! You double-crossing, sneaky, disloyal..."
"Oh, do shut up." snapped back Bulma, rolling her eyes. "If I had to begin with my complaints about you and your little posse we'd be here all day. Let the people who actually matter talk. Goku! Care explaining what is going on?"

Pilaf made some incoherent rage sounds, then turned to Mai and asked her if she was fine. She merely answered with a quick nod, and not much fuss.

"The Ox King was a friend of my grandpa's!" shouted Goku. "He does not want to hurt me, so we may be coming to an agreement."

"Well, that is... good, I guess. And rather lucky. Do carry on!" encouraged Bulma - still from afar, and immediately retreating to a position from where she could hear the discussion without being immediately in harm's way if things went south.

"Alright, so," Goku said, "I think we're in a position of stall. The Ox King does not want to kill me."

The Ox King nodded.

"Pilaf can't kill me."

Pilaf's eyelids twitched, and he added nothing.

"And I certainly do not want to kill or hurt any of you. We have competing interests, and need to find some sort of mutually beneficial deal we can all agree to."

The Ox King scratched his head. "Boy, yer making ma' head hurt more than yer kick did, and that was some kick. Why don't ya just leave us yer prisoner, and we go all our ways? Like friends, ya know."

"I already said why I can't," said calmly the kid, "but more than that, while I don't like the idea of depriving people of their freedom, Mai was violent and put us into danger. She attacked us without warning, tried to steal from us and possibly kill us. We have no reason to trust her and leave her free. Bulma suggested we could in exchange for the Dragon Ball, but I am not sure this is morally acceptable either. Not unless we have a real guarantee that she will not go ahead to hurt us or anyone else."

"Well, yer right on that, boy. Nobody likes a thief." the man's attention turned to Pilaf, his voice now dangerously irritable "Pilaf! Ya ordered that woman to steal from the boy?"

"Not at all!" replied Pilaf, apologetic. "She was supposed to guard our castle, and study the phrasing of our wish to the dragon. That she left on her own whim is a grave violation of our wishes, and one she will be severely punished for after returning to our service!"

"That is slightly reassuring." Goku nodded, pensive. "But then, don't you think it would be fair for you to take responsibility for the actions of your subject, and repay us to free her by giving us the Dragon Ball, as we asked?"

"He does make sense." admitted the Ox King. "Ya didn't explain the situation well when we came here, Pilaf."

"There was nothing to explain! We have a birthright to our role as King, and we are but trying to fulfill that destiny! Some untoward actions might be necessary, on that road - and yet, we did not order our subject to do anything as underhanded as this. We would ask her why did she think it a good idea, but as you can see..."
"Right! Can't ya free her mouth so we can hear what she has to say, the poor girl!" shouted the Ox King towards Bulma.

"No can't do!" answered the girl. "Sorry, but she may have intel we don't want you to know about us. I'm not going to ungag her until we come to a final agreement. That is, until you realise that your only option is giving us the Dragon Ball. But carry on!"

"Pilaf, I see why ya don't like the girl." mumbled the giant, hunching back next to his co-conspirator. "She's a real pest. Ya think she'd have less spunk when I can split her in two like a twig."

"Right? Right?" said Pilaf, nodding enthusiastically. Goku merely sighed.

"I think she's right, though." he said. "While she really could be more... delicate about it."

"Listen, why are ya even working for her? She's weak like a squirrel. I can teach ya more fighting, like your grandpa did. We can just get rid of her and make our Pilaf king, what d'ya say?"

"I do not work for her." Goku frowned. "I work with her. I have my own motives. And I do not like killing, or your apparent eagerness for using it as a solution to your problems. The strength that comes from martial arts should be used with responsibility, for self betterment and to pursue moral goods, not to enforce and perpetuate oppression."

The Ox King sighed. "Yer Gohan's son alright. Sounds like he's talking right through ya right now. Where is he now by the way?"

The kid winced. "He's... not here any more."

"Oh. I'm sorry, kid. He was a good friend. I wish I could have spoken with him one last time. But for ya, he must have been much more."

"Yes." Goku lowered his eyes, hiding his expression from those strangers. "He was."

"Pilaf, ya see how it is. Ya can't really fault him, he's a really good kid. What ya wanna do?"

"I will remind you," hissed Pilaf, "that if I don't get to become king, your daughter that you went as far as making me sign an actual prenuptial contract about does not get to become queen!"

"Ya came asking for her hand!" roared the other in protest. "And ya said ya could become king! Ya didn't mention this kid! Don't make me use ma' axe!"

"No axe using, please." pleaded Goku.

"Well, what if we give them the Dragon Ball?" Pilaf calmed down significantly upon the mention of weaponry being involved in the debate, "They will only have the one, and we will have the remaining six. We will go nowhere. What good is it even for them?"

To this, Goku lifted a finger. "Actually..."

"Goku!" called him Bulma, alarmed.

"...for the sake of fairness in this negotiation..."

She now was outright running towards him. "Don't you dare! Do you know how much effort did it cost me to..."

"...you should probably know, we already have all the other Dragon Balls too," concluded the kid.
Castle dungeons, Treasure Room, two days before, 11:27 PM

"Bulma Briefs, the game is over! Leave the Dragon Ball where it is, take the elevator, toss any weapons you have on the ground and come out with your hands behind your head!"

Well, that did it. Bulma decided she had to take the risk, and hope her work was good enough to fool whatever safeties were in place. She opened her belt bag, extracted the spherical device, a modified magnetron identical to the one she had set up earlier in their bedroom, and turned it on with the flick of a switch. A faint LED glow confirmed the thing was working. Carefully, she approached the platform where the Dragon Ball was set up with both hands, and then in an extremely nerve-wracking instant she swapped the real Ball for the simulacrum. The weight was approximately the same, and hopefully, the signal meant to fool any radar was good enough to fool the alarms too.

Nothing happened.

Bulma sighed in relief. She slipped the Dragon Ball into her bag - now lined with metallic mesh cannibalised from the ovens she had disassembled, to shield it from detection by the enemy radar - and closed it. Now came the part where she had to confront the angry armed mercenary and somehow manage not to get shot. What was worse, the communicator seemed not to work underground, so she needed to get out of the elevator before she could call help. She was not looking forward to any of that, but hopefully she could talk her way into a stall long enough that Goku would catch up...

Ground floor, Throne Room, one day before, 11:45 AM

After rummaging through all of the stuff left by Bulma Briefs and companion in their room, Mai had found only five capsules that could possibly contain the Dragon Balls. She handled them carefully and took them downstairs, to the throne room, the only one that she trusted as having enough empty space for what she needed to do.

If one of the capsules contained the Dragon Balls, Pilaf had suggested in a rare flash of insight that one of the others, or even all of them, could be booby-trapped, and she agreed wholeheartedly that was a possibility. That would be an easy way to get a good shot at knocking down an enemy who tried stealing them. So she put as much distance as possible between her and her target area, turned on the ventilation systems to disperse any gases that may be freed by the traps, and prepared to open them. She expected any traps to be incapacitating but not lethal - after all, mistakes are always possible, and dying by falling for your own trick is not a very desirable outcome.

She clicked one of the capsules, and tossed it as far as she could. After the usual puff of smoke, a cache smashed against the floor, opened up, and a wardrobe worth of clothes exploded out of it. There were so many, it was hard to imagine they could possibly be justified by a trip any shorter than multiple years. Mai went on to try the other capsules. Three went on with similar results - one was full of lingerie, another of books and magazines, and a third one of assorted electronic components.

Mai weighed the last capsule in her hand. Either Bulma said the truth, and there was a 20% probability that she'd end up with this outcome, or she lied. Considering the character of who they were dealing with, the likelihood of the latter option seemed overwhelming to her at this point. She pushed the button and tossed it. One second later, she was looking at a collection of enough optic discs to store any movie ever produced.
The Dragon Balls were nowhere to be found, and the radar still obstinately reported them as being in the castle. If the signal could be faked, she realised, that meant the one in the treasure room wasn't necessarily safe either - but she couldn't go and check, since the elevator lock was still busted.

Without wasting a moment, Mai went to grab a few weapons, some supplies, then opened up a capsule jet, jumped in and piloted it at top speed towards the position where Shu had sent his drone to invite Bulma and Goku to the castle, hoping their base would still be there.

Moving to the new location had taken a while. It was further north, closer to Bulma and Goku's base, in an unmarked spot in the middle of the wilderness. When they got there, Goku quickly dug a hole with his bare hands where Bulma directed him to. She was still supervising him, while keeping Mai under watch and close enough to both of them. Pilaf and the Ox King observed from afar.

"I'm still not over it!" she said, bitter. "Why did you have to go and tell them?"

"It was the honest thing to do, since we were getting to a deal." replied Goku, while going through dirt and sand like a drill, without breaking a sweat. "And we were reaching a stall, because they thought the Dragon Balls would never be used."

"You mean this way, they will think that since we will use them, they will scatter around the world, and they will at least get another fair chance next year?"

"That's what I told them, yes." the kid raised his head from his work. His hands had just hit on a plastic container. "Won't they?"

"With me having one year of prep time?" Bulma chuckled and shrugged. "I mean... they can try."

"You know," Goku quickly dug around the container, freeing it from the ground, "I am beginning to question whether I should be helping you at all at this point."

"Aww, don't be like that. I'm not a villain."

"I do not think anyone truly is. But you can act like one, at times."

He pulled the cache aboveground, and opened it. The inside was lined with more metallic mesh of the sort Bulma had taken from the ovens. In it lay five of the Dragon Balls, the ones they had collected and hidden there on their way to Pilaf's castle, before even entering his home turf. The sixth, that Bulma had taken from his treasury, was still in her belt bag.

Dragging the balls with them, they came closer to the two self-proclaimed kings.

"So you lied about putting the Balls in a capsule." grunted Pilaf. "In fact, is it even possible?"

"I do not know, and I strongly advice against it." replied Bulma. "I did not try. But if whatever binds magic to the Balls is in any way similar to what binds a soul, or vital energy, to a living creature, then I think there could be a real risk of breaking them for good if you did."

Pilaf gulped.

"I tell you this," continued Bulma, "because in the event of you getting your hands on a Ball in the future, I think it's in our common interest that you do not try. Worst case scenario, we both lose forever what we want."
"We will take your advice in... due consideration." he mumbled in reply.

A ringing sound came from his pocket, and Pilaf picked up a cell phone. Bulma pointed to her ear with one hand while waving her gun with the other, and Pilaf put the call on loudspeaker, with an annoyed moan.

"Shu here," said the voice of the caller, "you will not believe it, Your Majesty, but I have managed to break into the treasury and, well, the Ball is... the Ball has..."

"Been replaced by some kind of dummy that did not however trigger the alarms?" finished Pilaf for him. "Yes, we are aware of that."

"Oh, you are?" Shu stopped for a while, surprised. "I really do not know how it was possible. The device itself is remarkably ingenious - it should not have been even possible to modify the resonance frequency of a magnetron, but apparently using capsule circuitry whoever built this was clever enough to..."

"Will you just stop praising the enemy?" snapped the other, irritated. "Yes, we were duped on all fronts. We know."

"I apologise, Your Majesty."

"It's fine, my dear Shu. Just stand by for further orders."

"So, now, what do we do?" intervened the Ox King. "Yer going to free Pilaf's companion?"

"In exchange for the Dragon Ball." replied Bulma. "As agreed."

"That does not suffice!" screamed Pilaf. "What if you wish for yourself to become king instead? Or something else that will get in our way."

"I can vouch that Bulma mostly wants to see if the Dragon works, and her wish is rather inoffensive," Goku said, stepping in between the two, "and if she agrees, I could actually explain..."

"Over my dead body!" she shouted.

The kid sighed. "...it's inoffensive."

"And what guarantee do we have that you will not denounce us to the usurper?" inquired further Pilaf, suspicious.

"I'm afraid you will have to take our word for it. As I am sure the Ox King can guarantee, my grandfather was a person who took his promises very seriously, and he taught me to do the same. And after this is over, Bulma wants me to cooperate with a certain project of hers, which means I can also put as a condition that she keeps hers, too."

"Fine by me." the girl shrugged. "It's not like I'd want to solve the issue by calling the cops either, really. It would be a bit anticlimactic. But I don't want any of you around when I summon the dragon! No telling whether the blue imp there will have a sudden impulse to just run to it and express his wish before I get mine. And Goku, you go with them to keep an eye on what they do."

Pilaf's face became purple with outrage to this, but Shu's voice, from the still open call, came first, stopping it. "May I suggest then that we set up, uhm, a camera or something, to record the moment miss Briefs expresses her wish? That would work as a confirmation of it being innocuous, and it would be really useful to just capture some footage of the dragon itself."
Everyone nodded to this extremely reasonable request, including Goku, except of course for Bulma.

"What part of *over my dead body* did you all not get!" she shrieked. "Goku, do you want me to *die* of embarrassment?"

"Why is it that embarrassing?" he asked, candidly.

"We can assure you," said Pilaf gravely. "that after you lied to us, stole from us, took one of our subjects hostage, and delayed our ascension to the throne by one year with your treacherous trickery just to pursue whatever your capricious desires are, our opinion of you can not fall any lower, regardless of what your wish is."

Bulma threw her hands into the air. "Ok, *fine!* Just set up the damn camera, let's do the exchange, then I want you all out of my hair."

The exchange was rather unceremonious, being almost all parties involved severely displeased by at least some details of the overall agreement. Pilaf handed over the Dragon Ball reluctantly, and Bulma had to wrestle it out of his hand as he didn't really want to let it go. Mai's hands were freed and she was pushed towards Pilaf and company, without any of her weapons or gear. Bulma made it an explicit condition that her gag be removed only once she was out of her hearing range. After her health was ascertained, and she shot her fair amount of angry looks at Bulma, they were given a capsule containing a small jet, to use to get away from the place. Bulma would time ten minutes before summoning the dragon, and Goku had to guarantee that they flew in a straight line for at least that long. It would have been ideal if he were the one piloting, but of course, he didn't know how to do that, so that wasn't an option. They decided they would simply fly straight north on autopilot, and since Pilaf refused to do any more piloting work now that he had his subject back, Mai was put in the seat for any emergencies. Bulma explained to Goku how to check that the route was correct, and that she wasn't playing any tricks, by looking at the compass. Worst case scenario, explained Bulma with a chillingly cheerful smile, he was surely sturdy enough to survive a fall from cruising height, which is more than could be said about Pilaf or Mai. Goku frowned at the suggestion but said nothing, and accepted that he'd at least check the direction. The company got on the jet, Mai and Goku sitting in front, Pilaf barely fitting under the hunched mass of the Ox King which took most of the backseat space, and they flew off. Thirty seconds later, according to the agreed terms, Mai's gag ought to have been removed, and Bulma wondered if that was just the wind she was hearing, or if the distance had still not been enough. She sat alone, in the middle of the wasteland, on a rock, with seven glowing magic spheres in front of her, and a chronometer in her hand.

The Dragon Balls were glowing softly and in sync. They also emitted a slight hum that they never did when alone - as if they were resonating together in some mysterious way. It was like the power inside them was pulsing, and pushing to be freed.

Bulma felt a pang of awe and fear. She had already seen and manipulated magic, but this felt a step up. This was nigh omnipotence, laying at her feet. She had not really stopped to think about it while gathering them, and now the full weight of it struck her.

The chronometer buzzed. Ten minutes had passed. Slowly, Bulma got to her feet, put the watch in her pocket, and extended her arms and hands over the seven Balls. She wasn't sure this was necessary, but for such a momentous occasion, it surely felt right.

"O powerful dragon Shenron," she said, loud and clear, "come forth, and grant my wish!"
Thanks a lot to intangible_girl for the reviews! It's always good and motivating to read someone appreciate one's work and taking the time to say how and why. I hope you'll continue be entertained in the future!

Sorry if this chapter took a bit long! I was almost finished with the next one last week, but then for some reason I basically got stuck until now. It's not the most exciting chapter but things had to move forward - next one is going to be the first part of the real finale of this arc! Look forward to it!
Chapter 8 - How to strain your dragon

The signal crossed the boundaries of space and time; it travelled through the holes in the fabric of both until it wormed its way completely out of them, in a place whose location would have been impossible to point out to any of their dwellers unless you had at least five index fingers able to move in ten different orthogonal directions. Amidst the broken fragments of reality that still obstinately persisted even this far, a creature of power and dream slept.

The signal called to it, and woke it up, and opened its eyes.

Damn, not again!, thought the creature.

The jet had been flying for a while at a moderate cruising speed, with Goku keeping an eye on the compass to make sure they were constantly heading north. Mai had not shown any signs of resistance or opposition; she had just obeyed her orders, sat on the pilot seat with her hand loosely on the stick in case of need while the auto pilot did its job. In the seat behind, the Ox King and Pilaf were chattering - or at least, the former was trying to.

"So, what flowers ya like best, Pilaf? I ask because ya got to order those things in advance to be sure ya get everything perfect and all. Chichi really loves daisies, ya know."

Pilaf shifted uncomfortably in the tiny seating space that was left to him. "Let's just go with what she wants."

"Perfect! Ya'll see, it'll be really good. All covered in daisies."

Something started happening outside, and Goku checked the control panel's watch to find out that ten minutes had passed. This was probably a sign of the coming of the dragon.

First, the sky got dark, suddenly. Without anything blocking out the Sun, the light simply drained from it, leaving a darkness deeper than any night, moonless and starless. Then clouds gathered swirling, from all directions, at blinding speed, swirling towards a centre.

The plane shook violently.

"What was that?" asked Goku.

"Turbulence. I need to disengage the autopilot."
Goku said nothing, as this seemed the kind of situation when it was indeed a reasonable reaction. Mai looked concentrated. She kept a tight grip on the flying stick.

"Did the ancient texts always say that this would happen?" asked Pilaf, worried. "Is this normal?"

"I'm afraid since the last time the Dragon Balls were used was apparently more than one hundred years ago, this is the first time anyone gets the chance to fly a plane during a summoning, Your Majesty. We're in uncharted territory."

"Oh, great." grumbled the other. "Well, I trust your ability."

Another shake, this time stronger. The plane tilted violently on the side.

"Is the wind really this strong?" asked Goku.

"You want to pilot yourself?" snapped back Mai, angry and focused, then she jerked the stick suddenly, just as another bout of turbulence hit the plane. This time they ended up at a right angle with the ground; Pilaf let out a small shriek as he fell into the body mass of the Ox King.

"I was just asking."

"Well, don't, not when I'm trying to... HOLD ON TIGHT, ANOTHER ONE COMING!"

The shakes got even more violent. Mai appeared to be fighting them with all her power, and the altitude of the plane lowered, but it kept getting worse. Now they were spiralling and descending in a disorderly trajectory.

"I'm sorry! Something broke... I don't have control any more!" screamed Mai, frustrated. "We need to abandon craft!"

"With what? We don't have parachutes!" asked Pilaf, panicked.

Goku kept his cool. "We don't need them. Ox King, you can handle this altitude, right?"

"Easy, boy. I jump higher than that."

"Then grab Pilaf and prepare to jump down, and soften the landing for his sake. I think you can ammortise the brunt of the impact with your legs and arms?"

The other was puzzled for a while, then shrugged. "I can jump this high with Chichi in ma' arms and she don't get hurt."

"Perfect. Mai, you're with me then."

"No," the woman kept her eyes forward. "Someone has to keep the attitude of the plane at a minimum of stability, or you might get hit by a wing spinning when you jump out and you won't be able to control your landing. My first duty is to the safety of my King."

Pilaf was transfixed with gratitude. "Mai..."

"Are you sure?" asked Goku "I can stay with you until it's convenient to jump."

"I don't want your help, monkey boy." she said with spite. "I can do this on my own. The crash doesn't have to be fatal, and I can control it better if I have the plane all for myself. Now go!"

She pressed the button that unlocked the doors, and as they opened, the air pressure dropped, almost
At the beginning, nothing happened. Bulma had started to feel a bit ridiculous, pose and all, when she realised the air was somehow chiller that it was a few seconds ago. Then it all happened very fast, and it was instantly noticeable. First, the sky darkening. Then she had a sense of vertigo at the immensity and speed of the clouds that amassed themselves, and amidst all of that, a tinge of childish exhilaration at the awareness that this was all a direct consequence of her words and actions. The Dragon Balls glowed furiously, they became so bright it hurt to look at them directly, and their blazing light made Bulma respectfully step away from them. And then a gigantic bolt of light shot out of them, aimed straight at the sky. It zoomed upwards, pierced the clouds, flew beyond them, the light twisting itself sinuously, with life and purpose. It took the shape of a bright serpent emerging from the ground and twisting and turning its coils across the sky, in loops as wide as a dozen men, swimming in and out of the clouds.

Bulma gaped as the light dimmed down, revealing the scaly skin of a reptilian creature. A head formed; two swirling moustache, bright, gaudy feathers, gnarly horns. A jaw full of monstrous teeth, each big enough to crush a human skull. Red eyes without pupils, glowing under a furrowed brow. When it was finally over, the girl gazed in awe at the most enormous being she had ever seen. It was so impossibly big her brain refused to believe it could be alive, let alone floating in mid-air like a zeppelin without any wings. She had heard about it, and read about it, and expected to see it, after she found out that magic did exist. But somehow her brain had never processed the full entity of that revelation. Now it was undeniable, in front of her, and it sent her head spinning.

She was face to face with a living, breathing magical wish-granting dragon, a creature so outrageous it defied every known law of nature, and that creature was looking at her, and opening its mouth.

"I am the eternal dragon," it spoke, in a deep, powerful voice that was painfully loud even dozens of metres below its source, "and I have come to grant your wish. Speak, human, and I will do as you command!"

Bulma opened her mouth to speak, and found that at that moment, words failed her. She had thought up so well how to phrase her wish, but now she was just so overwhelmed she couldn't remember it. One part of her mind was racing, considering all the implications of the fact that magic not only existed, but could produce effects this big; another was reeling at the thought of truly asking the eternal dragon for something as trivial as a boyfriend, an idea that originally had started in her mind perhaps more as a joke than anything, from when she had not taken this matter that seriously; and the deeper, more instinctual part of it was just screaming to run the hell away from the giant toothy flying snake thingy.

She took a deep breath, told the first part that there would be plenty of time to play around and understand things better later, the second to take a look at that damn camera that was recording her actions to confirm that she kept her side of the deal, and the third to just shut up already if it could contribute nothing of value. She closed her eyes for a minute and recalled exactly the final formulation of the wish she had decided upon.

"Dragon, I will now lay down my wish; it is not to be granted until you hear again the words 'please grant my wish'." she said. "I wish for a boyfriend; said boyfriend must be a male human in an age range between 16 and 20 who satisfies all my internal criteria for physical attractiveness and personal compatibility up to as high a degree as reasonable, and not inferior to the bare minimum that I would
consider satisfying in a romantic partner; he has to exist and having lived and grown up naturally as a human being at the time of this wish, and he has to not be coerced into becoming such, but take the choice of his own free will upon meeting me; our meeting can come to fruition through any circumstances that make it the most natural, but not later than six months from now, and in order for me to be sure that the meeting is not just a coincidence, but the realisation of this wish, I should receive explicit notification five minutes earlier in a form that is only receivable or understandable by me. Please grant my wish!

The ancient creature stood silent, as in meditation. Its eyes gleamed more than usual, then dimmed down again, and finally, it disclosed its fanged, grizzled jaws, and spoke.

"So let me get this straight," said the dragon, "you express a wish, then purposefully and methodically close all avenues through which I could have granted it. Is this your way of being a smartass?"

Bulma blinked. Was the eldritch creature of infinite power bantering with her?

"I am sorry," she snapped back, distinctly not sounding it at all, "but I had expected an eternal, all-powerful dragon to not be bothered by that. I am pretty sure there are other ways! Just do... something."

"Something. That is incredibly helpful and specific." good thing the creature had slightly lowered its volume, now, or the deafening boom of it would have made it hard to recognize its sarcastic tone. "Pray tell, how would you, if you were in my position - not that with your limited human brain that is easy to imagine - go about granting your own wish?"

"Just, uh," Bulma thought about it for a moment, "find the perfect man for me, and arrange a series of casual events that through a butterfly effect of sorts leads us to meet and fall in love?"

That did sound a bit preposterous, upon saying it out loud.

"I think."

"I see." commented the dragon "I see, I had not thought of that! That is indeed very easy. I only need to find, among living male humans in your specified age range, someone whose neural and behavioural patterns match perfectly the confused, extremely detailed and yet often contradictory idealised picture you have built up in your own mind. After that, I need to set up a chain of events that will lead him to meet you within six months' time, even if he lived across the world, and all of that just by influencing unliving, unfeeling things, and yet somehow while being absolutely sure that the wish will eventually be granted. Because woe on me if I were to nudge someone's free will here and there, the little missy has ethical concerns over asking an ancient deity to be her freaking dating service! But of course leading them to unfailingly do something they otherwise wouldn't have done by influencing the events outside of them is okay, because at least I didn't do anything to their brains, nevermind that the result is exactly the same."

"Are you telling me," said Bulma, frowning, "that the ideal man I have wished for does not, in fact, exist?"

"Probably; and if he did, it would still be impossible to arrange your meeting under such restrictive conditions. Make of that what you wish."

She sighed. "And what would the alternatives be?"

"I could, of course, just make you a magical construct, had you not explicitly cautioned me against
them. Magical constructs are wonderful things, and I take offense at you forbidding me to create
them as if you were to condemn a sentient creature to an eternity of suffering. It is, indeed, the other
way around. Magical constructs are the happiest creatures that exist. They are created with the
specific need to fulfil a purpose, and lo and behold, their purpose is immediately fulfilled! Unlike
yours, which you humans usually can't even figure out, then begin whining about around the age of
thirty."

"Please stop with the human hate," said Bulma flatly. "It's uncomfortable."

"I remember I was once requested one such construct by a man who wanted the perfect lover - yes,
you're not the first person in history to think up such a stupid wish, imagine that. She was beautiful
and happy for all her life. She was very healthy, and I could have made her immortal, of course, but
obviously she just had to die when her love did, or she would have been tremendously sad. Since he
wanted some variety in his relationship, she had not just one personality, but two, and would change
hair colour whenever she switched to help him keeping track. In fact, their love was so successful, I
think there still are some of their descendants around."

Bulma winced. "This is really creepy. Can we stop talking about it?"

"If this is any consolation to you," said the dragon, kindly, "I still do not think it would have been
easy to satisfy you even so. Your internal mental picture of what you would like to be your boyfriend
includes irreconcilable statements such as he should be clever and able to surprise me with his
comebacks and objections to my ideas but also he should somehow always end up agreeing with me
anyway. Not even magical constructs can go against the basic rules of logic."

"Ok, I get it, you're not giving me my boyfriend! So please stay out of my mind now, thank you very
much!" snapped Bulma. The dragon closed its jaws in what looked like a smug smile. Surely, it was
just the way its skull was shaped, and it was anthropomorphising to try and read that into a human
expression - but then again, a perpetual smug smile seemed to indeed fit this creature.

There was an awkward pause.

"Did you know?" said the dragon, "It is an objective fact that seven out of the ten most pleasurable
sexual acts throughout human history have involved a magical construct."

"OH, JUST SHUT UP ALREADY!"

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The fall would have already been pretty scary on its own, but in the darkness that had engulfed
everything, it was like plunging into a bottomless abyss. Goku wasn't much fazed, and had spread
his arms and legs to offer more resistance to air and slow down slightly, while the Ox King fell feet
first, hunched, with Pilaf basically cradled in his arms and too terrified to even scream.

"Don't ya move!" he shouted when they were close to the ground. "Here we go!"

He lifted his arms, tossing Pilaf violently upwards over the arc of one second. This way, Pilaf shed a
lot of his velocity in a relatively safe way - the acceleration was merely painful instead of outright
deadly. One instant later, the Ox King landed, his feet planting themselves solidly into the ground
and cracking it. He then extended his arms to catch Pilaf again, who let alone moving, had not dared
breathing during the whole thing. A few seconds and Goku touched safely the ground too, at some
distance, with a light landing softened by a roll.

The boy got up on his feet and looked around. "Is everyone okay?"
"Yup. Fine here!" confirmed the Ox King.

Pilaf made a retching sound.

After confirming that they all were healthy, Goku raised his eyes to the sky.

"Ya see the plane, boy?"

"No, unfortunately," he squinted, and kept scanning back and forth. "The clouds are too dense. It's weird. I would have imagined it should have been lower and visible by now. I don't understand why Mai was so obstinate about not leaving the plane. I'm sure we could have arranged something."

"I dunno." the Ox King shrugged. "I'm afraid we won't see her any more. Pity."

"That's out of the question!" said Pilaf, indignant. "She is not such an amateur that she would find her end just because of a little storm like this one."

"Pilaf, I feel ya, but..."

"Do you _know_ how much experience she has? Over one thousand flying hours earned during her service within the air fighter force of the Red Ribb..."

Pilaf shut up suddenly, but it was too late. The name had already drawn the Ox King's attention.

"Pilaf," he hunched down, coming face-to-face with him at an uncomfortably close distance, "were ya just sayin' Red Ribbon? Ya telling me that _she_ was Red Ribbon?"

"What's Red Ribbon?" asked Goku.

"She _used to!" protested Pilaf. "She works for us now. Heck, she defected to come work for us, and even brought with her a lot of gear as a proof of her good faith. She _stole_ from them, she keeps saying how they would surely shoot her if they could catch her..."

"What's Red Ribbon?" repeated Goku, patiently.

"A mercenary army, boy." spat the Ox King, with disgust. "Scum of the Earth, the whole lot of 'em. Thieves and murderers for money, and absolutely not to be trusted."

"You don't get it! She was the one who left them, and she's proved her loyalty over and over again. She came to us, she was the one who informed us of our heritage, who told us about the Dragon Balls, who spurred us to action, to reach for our own destiny! She was the one who always drove forward, the most eager to reach our objective! Without her, our own quest would not have been possible!"

Goku frowned. "That sounds suspicious. What did she have to gain from it?"

"Nothing!" Pilaf screamed. "All she wanted was the chance to follow us, to witness our expedition to seek for the Dragon Balls, and be there when I summoned the dragon and regained my birth right!"

"Who paid for the expedition?" asked the kid.

The other's face slumped into a stunned blankness. "Well," he answered, "we did."

A moment of meaningful silence descended upon all three.
"I see her!" the Ox King finally exclaimed, pointing at a small bright spot far in the distance that was flying stable and fast towards the horizon. "She’s going back to the place where yer friend summoned the dragon!"

"But she can't make it in time." muttered Goku, under his breath. "Can she?"

"Dunno, boy. What da ya think, yer friend's the type who could get into chatting with a magical dragon?"

———

"So, Shenron," said Bulma, sitting down on the ground and occasionally sipping from a canned drink she had retrieved from a capsule fridge, "I agree with you, I do think immortality would be nice, but I can't wish for it right now."

"Why, pray tell, would that be?" if the dragon had had pupils, you would have probably seen it roll its eyes. "One would imagine immortality to be the first any of you frail things would ask for. And yet, can you believe it?, no one ever has. They all ask for power or money or love or some other short-sighted nonsense! As if, given enough time, they couldn't get those on their own anyway. Oh, and by the way, it's Shenlong. You obviously need to get better at reading those ancient manuscripts if you make such trivial pronunciation mistakes."

"Duly noted. Regarding immortality, there's two reasons. The first one is that in order to wish for it I would need to properly plan the wish itself. It's pretty dangerous, you know. I wouldn't want to be stuck with immortality but not eternal youth, or..."

"Do you take me for an idiot?" the dragon interrupted. "You have been talking with me now for, well, way too long, and that should have been enough to realise that I'm not some mindless automaton, I hope."

"Admittedly, mindless automata usually don't have a tongue quite as sharp as yours." acknowledged Bulma.

"Thank you for the compliment. And so, you should realise I would not ignore all the obvious implications of a wish, or thoughtlessly grant it in a literal way to the point that it turns into a curse rather than a blessing. My creator originally asked himself that very question, and realised that only a sentient being could be a proper wish-fulfiller. And one quite proud in his own work, I would add. Trust me, if I wanted to screw you over, I would, and no amount of thinking your wishes through would save you. In fact, if I wanted to screw you over, I would have taken your earlier demand for me to, and I quote, 'shut up already'...

The girl brought a hand to her mouth.

"...and interpreted it literally, thus immediately considering your wish granted upon my stopping talking. But that would have been what a moron would do, and as I said, I take great pride in not being a moron. So my immortality package comes all included, eternal youth and a safety mental trigger for suicide in case something goes wrong."

"Well, that is very nice of you, and removes my first reason," said Bulma, "but not the second. See, unfortunately my using the Dragon Balls is... conditional. Specifically, I promised to some friends of mine that I would not use them for anything of too much import. The camera, there, is here so that they can check I kept my word afterwards."

Shenlong sighed. "Listen, human, I just want to get this over with. If you asked for immortality, what
would be the worst these friends could do to you? Kill you?"

"Catch me and trap me into unescapable imprisonment, thus forcing me to choose between eternal suffering and suicide?" suggested Bulma.

The dragon remained silent for a few seconds, impressed. "That's some friends you got there." he concluded.

"Well, one of them is a friend. The others are..." the girl made vague gestures, looking for the right word, "acquaintances? Rivals?"

"Mortal enemies that you blackmailed into doing your bidding?" tried Shenlong.

"Something along those lines."

The laughter of a dragon was a thing to witness - deep and booming like a volcano eager to erupt. "And you are the one who had qualms about me using a bit of mind bending to find you a boyfriend."

"It's very different. I gave them a choice. Granted, it was a choice between doing what I wanted and a significantly more horrifying alternative, but still a choice."

"You tell yourself that. But I guess that rules out immortality."

"Have I beaten the record for your longest summoning yet?" asked Bulma.

"That was ten minutes ago. Now that you have achieved this dubious honour, do you have any intention to free me of your company? My rules say I can't go until someone expresses a wish. My creator never assumed this could possibly pose a problem."

"Just give me a few minutes to think, okay?" the girl crossed her legs and took a thoughtful expression. "What could I ask that is relatively innocuous...?"

"Anything." growled Shenlong, exasperated. "For example, do you need a fresh change of panties?"

Mai could see the dragon right in front of the jet. The massive coils of the serpent rolling through the clouds were visible from kilometres away, as even in the darkness they emitted their own bright light. She quickly evaluated what would be the best place to land so that she would be close enough. Everything had gone horribly wrong, feigning the fall and hijacking the plane had been an act of desperation, she was sure that the dragon would vanish before she got to it, having granted its wish, but now apparently things were going slowly, for whatever reason, and as long as there was a chance, she would not give it up. By now her betrayal would have been apparent, which meant her cover was blown for good. It was all or nothing.

With the autopilot switched on again, the plane would keep flying in a straight line. Mai got up and winced uncomfortably while using her hand to retrieve the one emergency capsule she always kept hidden on her body - in the kind of place that amateurs like that girl would be too naive or shy to check. She removed the safety from the capsule and popped it up, revealing a suitcase. Opening it up, there were a gun, a grenade, and the pieces of a sniper rifle, as well as ammo cartridges for both firearms. She hooked gun and grenade to her belt, then, deftly, she started mounting together the rifle's parts, screwing in the barrel, hooking the scope. The plane kept flying smoothly, there was no wind or turbulence, not even the light one she had needed to exaggerate for her little deception, earlier. The shot would be hard, but not impossible, even from up in the sky. She thought about the
girl who had ruined it all, the one who had come and crashed her plan and made a fool of her. Bulma Briefs. She was down there right now, taking her sweet time asking the dragon to grant her wish, for whatever reason.

That was a mistake. In fact, Mai decided, that was the last mistake she would ever make.

"We could not imagine anything like that! We trusted her!" screamed Pilaf, waving his little arms around like a chicken trying to fly.

"Yer a dumbass!" roared back the Ox King. "Ya don't trust Red Ribbon people! Ever! I'm not letting ya marry ma' daughter!"

"Well, fine! We will become King anyway, and then you will see what it's like, to know that your daughter could have been Queen and instead is not because you wanted to make a scene!"

"King! Ha! Yer not becoming anything! If the Red Ribbon woman gets the to the dragon and makes her wish be sure that it'll be something so awful that yer not getting a chance ever again!"

"QUIET!"

The shout was like a sonic boom, that momentarily stunned both men and interrupted their fight. As they slowly turned towards its source, they saw Goku like they never had. Razor sharp focused, with a neutral expression and eyes cold as ice, looking like they could see through them.

"My friend is in danger." he said, calmly. "I would like to think what to do about that."

The others nodded and sat down, still mumbling something against each other. Goku ignored them, and looked towards the dragon, that was indeed visible even from there, albeit far - just a small bright spot on the horizon. Without a jet, there was no hope for him to reach it, even by running at his top speed, any sooner than in half an hour. That wasn't practical. In order to get there in time he needed to fly, fast. As he thought about this, Goku realised there was one thing he could use. If only he knew how.

"KINTOUN!" he shouted at the sky.

Pilaf looked puzzled, while the Ox King blinked and then got excited. "Ya have Muten's magic cloud? Can ya ride it, kid?"

"Not yet." muttered Goku. "Let me think."

Muten Roshi had seemed to assume that the cloud could indeed discern morality, and the cloud had rejected Goku, for whatever reason. If that was how it operated, there really was no hope. But what if it wasn't? What were Muten's exact words, again?

But remember - you can only ride it if you are pure of heart!

To be 'pure of heart' did not necessarily translate to morality, Goku reflected. Perhaps it was something more literal, and more suited to be discerned by a non-sentient magical item. Something that could be easily mistaken to overlap with common notions of goodness in enough cases that the words would be misinterpreted.

Goku focused on the notion of purity of intent. If that was how the cloud worked, it was no surprise that it had rejected him and his mind perpetually bubbling with doubts and speculations. He closed
his eyes and tried to meditate away all of his other thoughts. Focus on only one, the need of the moment, the one thought that needed to take precedence, and why he needed the kintoun in the first place.

*Save Bulma*, thought Goku, expelling every other consideration and worry from his mind. He used those words, repeated over and over, to push everything else aside. *Save Bulma. Save Bulma. SAVE BULMA.*

The tiny yellow cloud zoomed through the sky with its characteristic whooshing sound, fled low, and ran towards Goku without hinting at braking, as if it understood his hurry. The kid jumped up with perfect timing to fall down on top of it. His feet lodged themselves firmly into the cloud stuff, as if he was standing on a pillow, and stayed there. While Pilaf and the Ox King gaped in amazement, the cloud zoomed forward, faster than any jet, with Goku perched on top, looking forward, guiding it with his mind towards the dragon, and his only thought.

*Save Bulma.*

"...and see, the problem is, if I ask something that's too trivial, I will feel like I wasted my wish, and have not gotten enough of a chance to really witness your power. Which, I am sure, is amazing, don't get me wrong, so I want a wish that does it justice."

The divine creature gazed at the mortal girl from the heights of the sky and groaned in exasperation.

"My power may be amazing," it said, "but my patience is *decidedly not*. Can't you just settle on something?"

"We're getting there!" said Bulma, defensive. "We're brainstorming. By the way, what does it even mean to you, waiting a little bit more? You're immortal. Why does it bother you?"

Shenlong hissed smoke from his dilated nostrils. "Just because I have all the time in the world does not mean I can't get bored. Imagine this. You're spending your time in a timeless bliss. You have to make no effort nor work, and can simply meditate on the realities of existence in a half dream state while suspended amidst worlds. Then suddenly you're snatched from all of this, bound to a temporary material body with all its dreadful inconveniences, and forced to entertain a spoiled brat who just can't seem to decide on what she even wants. And you can't just ditch everything and go back, because that's your job, and you're forced by your own nature to take your job very seriously. Does that sound fun to you?"

"I'll admit it doesn't." said the spoiled brat.

"I am glad to know we *do* agree on something."

The human and the dragon both sighed, each for their own reasons. There was a moment of silence; Bulma gulped down the last of the drink she still held in her hand, then crunched the can flat and tossed it back into the fridge she had gotten it from. She stared into the distance, at nothing in particular, lost in thought. There was a whooshing sound, coming from afar.

"What was that?" she asked, distracted.

"Would you like me to tell you?" inquired the dragon. "That would count as a wish."

"Hell, no. I'll figure it out. Probably just the wind anyway."
She jumped up, extracted a pair of binoculars from her bag and started scanning the surrounding area. The desert looked clear, no one was coming.

"You know," said Shenlong, "if you were immortal, you would not have to worry about any dangers surprising you anyway. A much safer life."

"What the hell!" snapped Bulma. "What's with you trying to sell me so hard on immortality? Do you get my soul if I wish for it, or something?"

The dragon squinted in disgust. "What would I possibly do with that? I thought I made it clear I don't enjoy your company. I'm just trying to avoid a situation where I'm left here waiting for a wish for who knows how long."

"Well, then leave it. In addition, I don't think I would feel good about asking for immortality just for me. I think I would consider making everyone immortal."

"That is crazy, for more than one reason." said the other. "First, you're the one who was worried about free will and choice. Now you would thrust immortality on a whole planet full of people who didn't ask for it?"

"What's the difference? They can opt out whenever they want."

"It would be a choice between immortality and death, not immortality and mortality." pointed out the dragon. "Not quite the same thing."

"Why would anyone want to die anyway?" said Bulma, exasperated.

"I don't know. Ask someone who's suicidal, I guess. But you yourself have just talked about your soul, and have wondered if there is an afterlife, recently..."

Bulma hesitated a moment. "Is there?"

"I can't tell you for free. That's vital information, and it counts as a wish."

"Fine!" she went back to looking at the horizon with her binoculars, irritated. "I'll find out by myself."

"You'll surely do that, eventually. Maybe sooner than you think." the dragon sounded slightly amused. "But it will be too late to make any wishes at that point. Or you could just catch this fantastic chance to actually avoid that problem forever."

"Stop it I said!"

"Look at you, human. Such a simple mind. You wouldn't be so irritated if the offer didn't really tempt you..."

"I swear, not one more word, or..."

"Or what? You'll kill me? Well, you can't, because I am indeed immortal. And you're not. Yet."

"I'm not listening!"

"It would be really quick. You get to live forever. I get to finally go back to my slumber. Win-win, really."

"I don't plan on going back on my word for..."
"I'm sure there are going to be extenuating circumstances your so-called friends will be willing to consider. And immortality would be really useful."

"Well, I know that! What does it have to do with this?"

The dragon's voice lowered.

"What I mean," he said slowly, "is that immortality would be really useful to you, right now."

Bulma stopped, as she suddenly got the drift. She tried to not let any reaction show, stay relaxed as if nothing was happening, and casually put the binoculars back into her bag. She wondered what had happened to Goku, how far he was, and how much of a mistake it had been to waste so much time here, enough to obviously let someone catch up. Good thing the dragon had been willing to drop a few hints to her from the height of his omniscience, if only because he was worried his permanence in the material world would drag on even longer otherwise. At least they had something they could mutually benefit from, there. Trying not to shake visibly from the sudden jolt of adrenaline, Bulma drew in a short breath, then turned to talk as if what she was about to say wouldn't change her fate forever.

"Dragon," she shouted, quickly, "make me immo..."

The bullet crossed her skull from one side to the other, splattering her brain on the desert's dirt.

Chapter End Notes

And that's that! Sorry for the long wait, but next chapter is really long, and I wanted to have it all down before I uploaded this one. I have good and bad news. The good is, the next chapter is probably going to be up next week, with a lot of revelations and the grand finale of this arc! The bad is, I think I'll take a bit of a pause after that before I start posting the next arc. I'm not burned out, but I want to avoid getting to that point, and I felt like I was already risking lowering the quality of my writing just out of weariness. Don't worry, the story isn't in danger, but I need to breathe a bit and put my thoughts in order. See you next time!
From his vantage point on a cloud, high in the sky, surrounded by the whooshing air as he travelled faster than he ever had, Goku saw the scene play out in silence. One moment, Bulma was talking to the dragon, and he drew a sigh of relief, sure to have made it in time; the next one, a red stain appeared on the ground, and her body was falling like a ragdoll, as arms and legs gave up without life coursing in them any more.

A jumble of violent thoughts, of anger, fear and guilt as he understood immediately what had happened flooded his mind, and he lost control over his meditative state. The magic cloud gave in under his feet, and the kid fell to the ground. He caught himself just in time, stabilised himself with the help of both limbs and his tail, and managed to land on his feet, not without some pain.

"BULMA!"

He ran to the body, but it was only to confirm the obvious. There was not much left of her head at all. The impact, whatever had caused it, had been violent and sudden. Goku imagined this must be another weapon that he was not aware of - perhaps a bigger, deadlier version of those things that shot small metal chunks at him, the guns. He moved a bit aside, and amidst the messy bloody bits, on the ground, he found indeed a bullet. It was at least three times bigger than anything that Mai or the goons of that rabbit guy had ever fired at him.

"You must be her friend." said a resounding voice, coming from the sky. Goku raised his eyes to meet two glowing, red, inhuman ones peering at him from above.

"I was." said the boy, in a flat, emptied voice. "What of it?"

"Well, I have a proposal for you. See, I really need to just go already, and I am sure you must be devastated by her loss. It just so happens that I am absolutely omnipotent, and ready to grant any wish you may have."

"Are you saying that you can bring her back to life?" asked Goku.

"What, do I need to wink or something?" blurted out Shenlong, having quickly run out of patience. "Of course I can. Ask me here and now so we can get this over with!"

Goku felt a wave of relief overcoming him. Of course it wasn't permanent; it could be fixed; there was nothing to fear. He opened his mouth to speak.

"Dragon..." he started saying.
Two things hit him. The first was the sudden realisation that there was something wrong with this, that Mai and whatever weapon had killed Bulma must be still out there, ready to strike, since she had not come to ask her wish yet, and that reviving Bulma in this situation would only likely lead to losing her again.

The second was a sniper rifle bullet, hard, right in his throat.

At first, it was a feeling of sharp pain, but it only lasted a moment. It was followed by unconsciousness; and then, suddenly, hyper consciousness. Bulma's mind felt flooded with an array of sensations clearer, sharper than she had ever felt, and the input that these sensations arrayed to her brain, or rather, her mind, since her brain proper was still all over one square meter of desert on Earth, was so wildly incongruous she did not know how to process it. She felt yanked and pulled around. Accelerating upwards, or possibly falling. Tumbling through dimensions that escaped her ability to perceive them, shifting perspectives, landscapes that rotated themselves into completely different landscapes, she felt like she was travelling the space of thousands of galaxies in the blink of an eye, and yet not moving at all. Then it all came to a stop.

"Would you like to queue, please."

Bulma looked around, shocked, and grasped her chest. She expected to feel her heart thump inside it, but she had no heart any more. She should have been panting and wheezing, but she had no lungs. She felt like she had a body, a solid self she could touch and move, but it was nothing like before - this felt just like an empty shell for the wriggling energies of her mind, so light and agile it would conform directly to her thought, without the need to pass through the slow bottleneck of a nervous system to tell the sluggish flesh what to do. It felt like having lived all her life driving a car, and only now find out how much more natural it is to walk on your own feet, except your feet in this example would be also several orders of magnitude faster than the car. Her thoughts process were similarly unhinged from all limitations. No more need to burn energy and fire neurons. Her thinking was fast, and streamlined, like when she hit her best moments of flow while creating something.

And it immediately came to the only relatively logical explanation for what had just happened to her.

She was dead, and this was what came after.

"Miss," insisted the voice, slightly annoyed, "would you please join the queue."

The girl turned her head to look at whoever had spoken. It was a wimpy looking man. He wore glasses, an office suit, had a brush haircut, held a clipboard and generally looked like the lamest, most boring, most down-on-his-luck salaryman who had ever lived. He also had a red skin and small horns protruding from his forehead, so he was most likely a demon.

Bulma burst into hysterical laughter.

"The queue," he repeated, diligently, waving a pen towards the girl, "it is important."

"I am sorry, it's just all so... different from anything I ever imagined." said Bulma, still laughing so much that she would have had to dry her eyes if she had still owned tear ducts. "I will queue. Where is it?"

She couldn't see any queue, really. She looked around and found that she was standing on a road with a jagged edge, suspended like a viaduct over a seemingly infinite expanse of yellow clouds. The road was covered in a crowd so dense, she couldn't make sense of it. It looked like an amorphous,
infinite sea, without a beginning or an end, composed of billions of all the most improbable creature designs she could think of, while all retained enough humanoid appearance to appear recognizable as sentient beings to her eye.

The afterlife existed, and so did aliens. Quite a way to learn the answer to two of humanity's biggest questions.

"You are looking at it." said the clerk.

"This is the queue?" asked Bulma, stunned. "From where? To where?"

"From there," answered promptly the other, pointing at an empty spot as far as the orbit of Saturn, "to there." he concluded, pointing at a building as far as the closest star system.

The distances might have been a bit hyperbolic, but Bulma was still genuinely surprised that her sight could make both spots out. Her squishy human gelatinous eye bulbs wouldn't have managed such a feat.

"That's going to take forever!" she whined, loudly.

"That does not matter much anymore to you, I believe." commented flatly the clerk. "Plus, you will find out that time is a relative concept around here. Now please take your place in the queue. You will be processed and sent to your final destination as soon as possible."

"Final...?" stuttered Bulma, but the man was already scuttling away, welcoming other new arrives and pointing them to the beginning of the queue. She had to go, or someone else would take her place, and the only thing worse than being the trillionth in a waiting list to find out where her soul would spend eternity surely was to be the trillion and first.

To her surprise, she found out that she could walk approximately two point three astronomical units per second if she so wished, and so reaching the beginning of the queue was not as annoying as she feared it would be. Perhaps the wait wouldn't be so terrible either, then. The clerk had been right, distance and time did not seem to be as rigid and stuck up here as they were on Earth. And it's not like she didn't have ways to entertain her curiosity.

"Hello, my friend!" she said, cheerfully, to a creature that looked like a cross between a jellyfish and a sumo wrestler. "How is the weather on your planet?"

The creature answered with a series of gurgles and bubbling sounds coming out of a floppy aperture corresponding more or less to its mouth. Clearly, despite her newly expanded cognitive abilities, the language barrier was still a problem.

"Well, blurb glub to you too." she concluded, shrugging.

She switched to just waiting. She found it was not too hard to do, as her now unimpeded thought processes could just be easily switched to contemplating any matter of her liking, and even focusing amidst a crowd of alien ghosts waiting to be judged at the gates of the afterlife wasn't hard. There were no humans in sight, but that made sense - with how many inhabited planets there must be in the universe, and how many sentient beings dying on each of them every second, there would probably be another hundred kilometres of queue behind her before someone else from planet Earth arrived.

The situation certainly filled her with questions and a proportionate need for answers, but she couldn't help but also feel that this probably warranted a bit more worry than that. She had just been murdered after all; and leaving all material concerns behind her, while appealing on the face of it when flooded with these many new discoveries, didn't feel like the right thing. Besides, she would
have been more inclined to do it if she had reason to consider her situation irreversible; but as it happened, she had died just in front of the one thing in the whole world that could bring her back pronto. And if Goku was not a complete idiot - and luckily, he was all but - he would come to the same conclusion. So she would only have to wait for a while and soon she'd found herself yanked back to Earth, with a newfound knowledge of the metaphysical truths of the universe.

Goku would love debating this.

It should happen any second now.

How much did a second last, again?

She really couldn't know for sure. Her heartbeat was gone. No watches to be seen. And her inner sense of time was completely messed up by the loss of the cerebral waves it relied on to tick more or less regularly. And even if she could measure a second, nothing guaranteed that a second of proper time in this far removed metaphysical dimension had anything to do with an Earthly one. She sighed, and decided she should be prepared for a very long wait. Or a very short one.

The queue behind her was still pretty sparse, but suddenly, she noticed, it got far denser. What really struck her is that, unlike the rest, the mass of the newly arrived was all composed by individuals of the same species. Thin, tall creatures with a crystal-like skin through which their inner organs were visible were crowding more and more. Their group seemed to extended to where the eye could see. They were chattering among them - Bulma couldn't make up the words, but by how fast the exchanges were, she suspected they were still excited or scared. And why wouldn't they be? Obviously, whatever had happened to them must have been a major cataclysm. She could make out hundreds, thousands of them. Perhaps more. She couldn't count. It was impossible to understand what they were saying, and yet, she couldn't help notice, there was a recurring word that they kept saying over and over, enough that she eventually caught the sound. Well, not really a word in the human sense of the term. The sound was like a whisper, a rolling of the tongue and a hiss, in close sequence. Somehow, just listening to it sent a shiver down her back. Probably because it was something associated with so much death, she decided, it could not be a good thing. Whisper, rolling, hiss. In human sounds, it probably would have been an F, an R, and a Z. Frz, frz, they kept saying.

"Excuse me!" Bulma waved her hand to draw the attention of one of the clerks, who was patiently showing the way to the new arrived.

"Yes?" he asked, courteous. "Is there anything I can help you with?"

"Oh, well, it's nothing major." she said, dismissive. "I was just wondering, uhm, how many of these people have just arrived. Seems to be a big group. How come they're all together, but I can't see anyone of my species?"

"Oh, that." the employee checked his clipboard. "It's because they all died at the same exact moment. There's three billion, seven hundred million of them, more or less."

Bulma chuckled nervously. "Come on," she said, "that's not possible. That's an entire planet worth of people. How would they die all together like this?"

"Well, their planet was blown up." calmly replied the demon, with a smile. "Happens all the time. That's the entire species behind you."

The girl looked at the crowd of the crystalline creatures. Being here, she could accept that death, on its own, might not have been such a big deal after all. But genocide? Extinction? Knowing that there would be nothing after you, that the world you had grown up on and loved was now only dust and
asteroids? She had studied the kind of cataclysms that could do something like that to a planet, but it always had been mere speculation. She remembered seeing a supernova shine in the sky through a telescope as a child, and thinking it was very pretty. Yet perhaps she'd been staring at this - the death of entire species, erased from the cosmos. Looking at it in the face, seeing the billions literally flock to the gates of heaven, really gave the measure of how much tragedy that was.

"That's terrible." she said, shaken. "I guess that the word they keep repeating... fr... fz..."

She couldn't figure out how to pronounce the sound, and decided to add some vocals approximating the way she heard it to make it more friendly.

"...fraa-za, is the name of whatever hit them, then? What does it mean? Asteroid? Gamma burst?"

"Fra...? Oh, no!" the clerk laughed "That would be a person. Most races in the galaxy who possess the adequate phonetic apparatus pronounce his name as Frieza. It was him."

A moment of silence.

"A person," asked Bulma slowly, "can blow up planets?"

"More than one. But it's usually him." confirmed the other. "He doesn't really care for people who defy him, or disobey his orders, or just offend his sensibilities, I guess."

He thought about it for a moment.

"In fact, I'm not sure he really needs a motive at all."

"He doesn't need a motive." hissed Bulma. "To blow up a planet. With people on it."

"Well, yes."

All kinds of alarms fired in sequence in Bulma's mind.

"Where does this individual operate?" she asked.

"Oh, are you worried for your home planet? You're here now, it's not like it would affect you if..."

"Please."

The clerk looked at her a bit transfixxed, then smiled and shook his head.

"You're from a place called Earth, right?" he checked on the clipboard, browsing a couple of pages before finding the information he was looking for. "Oh... I didn't even know there were inhabited planets in that area of the galaxy, you know? I learned a new thing today! It's really out there in the boons. No trade routes or anything passing by, so it's unlikely that you will ever draw any attention. Not a strategic location or anything like that. Though however... good temperature range, abundance of water, lovely flora and fauna. It's a very nice piece of real estate. Don't worry, miss, Lord Frieza would never blow up such a pretty planet without good reason."

The girl didn't look very reassured, but seemed to ease up a bit.

"Though if he found out, I'm pretty sure he would kill everyone on it and conquer it. Which for us is usually even more work, because they trickle through instead of arriving in a single batch." he added, annoyed.

The girl shrieked in alarm.
"Are you serious?" she said, grabbing him by the shoulders.

"Miss, please." he firmly removed her hands. "You are here now. You should not concern yourself any more with things you can't change or affect, in the other world. Worries are for the living, is what we say! Just relax, and if anything were to happen, think of the positives - you would get to see your friends and family sooner than anticipated!"

"It's my planet! I need to talk with someone in charge... how can something like this be even possible!"

"Well, you will meet King Enma soon, for the judgement." said the clerk. "You could raise the matter with him, if it concerns you so much. But I would not advise that you upset him."

"We're talking billions dead - I sure hope he does get upset at that! How can no one have been informed or have done anything... this is absurd!"

The girl seemed to be a bit overloaded now, and she started mumbling and fidgeting nervously with her fingers, as if running quickly thoughts and calculations in her head, and the demon clerk took that chance to slip away. Unfortunately, given the nature of his job, dealing with people in a state of shock or with extremely unstable minds was the norm. Eventually, they would settle down and come to a more peaceable state of mind, as eternity blurred their mortal worries away from their mind - at least if they managed not to get on Enma's bad side. All problems of the material world seemed less important when put in perspective, and soon, even this new girl would learn that Lord Frieza blowing up the occasional planet was not such a big deal.

After all, he thought while walking away towards a new group that had just arrived and welcoming them with a smile, it was not like it happened more than once or twice a year.

It was a day of cold, sharp rain.

The girl was thirteen. She waited huddled in a corner, in the small shelter she and her companions had carved for themselves under a bridge, as water dripped all around through the makeshift walls of plywood and cardboard. In her hands was a knife. She toyed with it, turned it around, looked at the gleam of its blade under the faint light. A creaking noise came from outside.

"Yue, is that you?" she asked.

It wasn't. Yue was a small, lively black cat. This was a ragged boy of her age, clothes and hair drenched in rain, face bloodied.

"Mai, we have to run," he said, breathless. "We tried to steal some bread from the usual place. But master Zhang was really pissed. He said he wouldn't put it up with it any more, he has a family to maintain. He managed to take us by surprise, he grabbed Li and started beating him, he beat me up too..."

Mai rose to her feet. "Calm down. Why do you say we should run?"

"He's bringing him to the police, Mai!" the boy was crying as he grabbed her wrist and pulled it. "You know what they do to - to kids like us! He will talk, and they will come here. I don't want to lose you too!"

The girl contemplated the situation for a second. She was unmoved, and slightly repulsed by the pathetic display of frailty in front of her. The boy liked her, and she knew it, though he would never
say it out loud. But this was unsightly. Her fist clenched around the knife's handle, and she knew what she had to do.

"We will leave, you are right that this place is not safe any more." she said. "But first we will visit master Zhang. You will distract him, pretending to be stealing again. And when he comes to beat you, I'll take him from behind and stab him. Forget the bread, we can take all the money in his shop, and running away will be much easier."


She glanced sideways, at Yue, who had entered the shelter. The adorable creature walked around with her usual curious, elegant gait, holding the mangled corpse of a mouse in her jaws.

"Sure he could." said Mai. "That's how the world works. Let's go."

Through the scope, she saw Goku take the bullet in his neck, she saw him falter. She did not see him fall and die.

"Fuck." uttered Mai through her teeth, and prepared herself for another shot by pulling the bolt mechanism.

The boy tried to speak again, clenched his throat, in obvious pain, coughed blood. At least the hit had been somewhat effective. With some luck, she may have crushed his windpipe, which removed the risk of him wishing anything to the dragon. He now was coursing his neck with his fingers - yes, the bullet had somehow jabbed itself into his flesh, like an arrow, without fully piercing his skin. What a monster. Now he was pulling it out with his bare hand. The moment he managed to rip it, he let some pain show, and Mai waited for it to shoot a second time. This one got him in his arm. The kid's eyes widened, but now he knew what to do, and managed to rip off the second bullet before Mai had time to reload and fire a third one.

When she did, he jumped aside at the last moment and dodged.

Her mistake. She had been too perfect for her own good. The timing of her shots had been too regular - all he had needed was to jump randomly at the exact right moment to avoid the hit. This time, she let a bit more time pass, then she fired two shots in quick succession, chambering the round as fast as she could and sacrificing accuracy. She got him once, in the foot. Goku now was bleeding copiously, and his step slightly less sure. The pain must be having some effect even on the little monster.

She saw the kid turn towards her. By this point, he must have realised the direction the attacks were coming from, and must be racking his brain for a plan to counterattack. Come at me, kid, thought Mai. I've still got plenty of this stuff.

The bullet was the last of her magazine, so now she needed to reload. Too bad she had such a limited capacity rifle, but she usually wasn't in the business of firing at people who survived the first hit. When she got back to looking at Goku, he was doing something weird. Standing still, his eyes closed, facing her direction.

Mai had heard that some martial artists could perceive tiny changes in air pressure, vibrations, to detect hits before they touched them, and react. She chuckled. If it was air vibrations he was looking for, this boy was in for a harsh lesson about the speed of sound. Her bullet would reach him before any vibration caused by it.
She fired, aiming straight between his eyes, and saw him instantly thrown to the ground a few metres behind. The bullet rebounded. When he got up again, his forehead was bleeding, but it was relatively intact compared to the other parts of his body she had hit. Evidently, he was concentrated enough that he had managed to move - almost matching the bullet speed! - and toss himself backwards to lessen the impact as soon as he felt it touch his skin. Still, it had not been enough. But now the boy looked like he was getting angry. He was in the right mood.

Mai smiled. The only way this would end was with one of them dead on the ground.

The office's proportions were ridiculously out of scale. A ceiling loomed as tall as the sky, and above a mountain-like desk that looked like it was made of solid mahogany - if not for the fact that no trees of that plant could possibly produce logs big enough to build something of that size - were building sized office implements, such as a stapler and a dangerously full letter tray. It would have been certainly majestic enough to be what Bulma would have expected from the court wherein all the deeds of the souls who passed on are judged if not for being, well, an office.

"Next!" announced the red-skinned, bearded man sitting at the desk in an unkempt salaryman outfit. He plunged his hand into a messy bunch of documents and somehow, miraculously, extracted the right file, and started skimming through it. "So. Bulma Briefs, from planet Earth, age of death: 16 home world orbital periods and change. Ethical record..."

"Excuse me!" shouted Bulma, hoping that her voice would be heard from across the immense distance that separated her from the giant's ears.

He glanced downwards at her, annoyed.

"What is it? I'm working." he said.

"Well, yes, on the matter of deciding the fate of my immortal soul, so I feel like I should be involved." answered Bulma. "But never mind that, I want to make a report."

The divine clerk put down his file and leaned down a bit, peering from above the top of his desk. His eyes fixated on the girl, and his forehead corrugated with a frown. "A report. From you. Sure, go ahead, let's hear it."

"Ahem, thanks, your honour." Bulma tried to assume a formal attitude. "So, while queueing for this audience, I have learned that someone, in the mortal world, has the ability and the willingness to destroy an entire planet. And they appear to have just done so - as a whole species is in fact due to come to judgement right after me. I don't know what the gods' policies are with respect to the mortal realm, but surely, I would expect that an event of this magnitude should warrant some kind of action..."

"Sure it does," growled the giant, angrily, and then, turning towards his right, "PAPE! ALEPPE! You two care to tell me why no one has informed me of this matter?"

Two smaller demons in suits paled and begun stuttering. "Lord Enma... we didn't..."

"You know what the procedure is!" roared the divine judge "We need to file an Extinction Report in triple copy when stuff like this happens. Bring me the forms already! Or the archives will get up in a bunch when they realise they're still tracking a race that doesn't freaking exist any more. I don't even know why I don't send you two idiots to man the Spit-roasting Pits down under. Turning souls over the boiling magma may be the only thing you'd possibly be good at."
Bulma was speechless. "That was it...?" she finally managed to say.

"Well, yes, what else?" said Enma. "But thank you, that will spare me some time. Let's say we'll strike off your record that one time you 'borrowed' your dad's motorbike when you were thirteen and crashed it against a lamppost thirty seconds later."

"A broken motorbike," repeated Bulma, in disbelief. "Someone out there destroys planets, and I get judged over a broken motorbike. That my father was too forgetful to ever notice that was missing to this day, I'll add."

"You get judged over what you did, miss. When Frieza's turn comes, he will be judged accordingly too. I expect that will be a very short hearing."

"And when will it come?" asked the girl.

"We don't know the damn future here, miss. In your planet's units, his natural lifespan would probably allow him a couple thousand years, a few centuries more if he starts watching better what he eats. Obviously, he has lots of enemies who would be more than happy to speed up the process. They usually get a few points from me for at least trying. Now, on to our business. When you were six, you modded a clockwork mouse and sicced it on your mother to chase her from the kitchen and steal some cookies. Ingenious, but devious..."

He kept listing inconsequential sins and equally inconsequential good actions, occasionally writing something down on a form, ticking boxes, taking notes. Bulma watched and listened in bafflement as this ridiculous act of celestial bureaucracy played out, while the demon clerks zoomed back and forward with mounds of papers in their arms, carrying books and folders in what looked like the most pointless job that had ever existed, turning people's lives into scores and storing them in some forgotten celestial vault that surely no one would ever open again. Behind her, just outside the office's door, came the unintelligible wailing of an entire species who had just met its demise.

"This is stupid." said Bulma, flatly.

A gasp and a stunned silence overtook the office. The demon clerks stopped mid-step and turned their eyes to the two main actors of a play that seemed to be on a quick route to become a tragedy.

Bulma looked up, defiant, into the eyes of the God of the Underworld.

He looked back, burning with anger.

"Excuse me?" he growled.

"I said that this is stupid." she repeated, calmly. "I don't see in what way could this judgement be morally superior to that imparted by any fellow human of mine who were to read an abridged bullet point account of my life. Meanwhile, you're in front of one of the greatest evils that a mind could possibly imagine, and you ignore it, because it's not your job."

"That is correct." said Enma. "Now shut up and don't open that mouth to say something even stupider, because I guarantee, if you keep pissing me off and wasting my time, I...

"You what?" screamed the girl "You will send me to Hell? For talking back to you? When someone is down there blowing up planets and you won't do a damn thing to stop them despite having the power to..."

A light of realisation dawned in her eyes.
"But you don't." she said, slowly. "That's why."

The clerks turned their glance down and scampered out of the office.

"Woman." growled Enma. "I warn you. Not another word."

Bulma continued, undeterred. "You can't. You're not strong enough. You said earlier that you don't know the future. Heck, you have to read a file to know about my life. Your power is not infinite. In fact, it's so limited even a mortal can get the drop on you, if they're strong enough. This Frieza person can do what he wants because he can literally kill the gods."

"THAT IS ENOUGH!" roared the judge. His angry voice alone was like a searing hot supersonic wind. Had Bulma still possessed flesh and bones, the former would have been charred and ripped off the latter. As it was, she didn't suffer any consequences, but the feeling wasn't too different. She was wheezing in pain when she saw with a corner of her eye Enma ripping her file in half and tossing it in the trash bin.

"I don't need that anymore. Miss, you're going down. And for your information, you're right - even if I could leave my post and descend into the mortal realm, I would not be able to put down someone like Frieza. But there are those who could. There are scores above me who are stronger and greater, great enough to create and destroy on scales that your puny mortal minds can barely appreciate, and you know why they don't do anything? Because for all of your little conceited ego, miss Briefs, you matter nothing. You are just grains of dust in the wind of time, pointless and without consequence until they get in someone's eye. One of your lives is nothing to the truly great ones."

"One," gasped Bulma, still feeling like her skin was on fire, "or three billion, seven hundred million of them."

"That's right. You should be grateful for what you have. Your life counts for naught. You come here, you get one shot at eternal leisure - and you wasted yours. I hope that regret will make your pain more acute in the eons to come, if such a thing is even possible."

His hand hovered on a big, red button, on the side of his desk.

"Joke's on you," muttered Bulma, with a smirk, "send me wherever you want, I'm going back to Earth soon."

"That is very rare, but not unheard of. But no matter how hard they try, everyone comes back here, eventually. And I have very good memory for little brats like you."

The girl stood, trying not too successfully to straighten her back a bit.

"That's where you're wrong." she said. "I swear I'm never coming back here again."

"So they all say. Good riddance."

Enma pushed the button. A trapdoor opened under Bulma's feet and she started falling down, away from everything that is light, life and joy, into the darkness.

It was a day of hot, scorching sun.

Even just standing in the open training field was almost unbearable, but Mai was preparing to fight as if it had been a fresh summer evening. She put on her gloves and bit down on her mouth guard.
Her opponent was gearing up in the other corner of the square. A friend who was acting as his second made a gesture pointing at his mouth, and the other shook his head, then aimed a dangerous grin at Mai, across the ring. He was cocky, and had reason to. The match up was as unbalanced as they come. He was three times her size; taller, broader, heavier, more muscular. Their training sergeant had pegged down Mai as having a problematic attitude - too brash, he said, and aggressive, and prone to insubordination if it came to that. She knew all too well what he thought, and she didn't care. She also knew he was putting her through the grinder in the hopes that she'd either finally give up or die.

She didn't care about that either.

It was the day in which Commander Red came to supervise the training, to get down and meet the troops, as he put it. She saw him in the corner of her eye - amiably chatting with the training sergeant while Staff Officer Black stood awkwardly on his side.

**Battles are won by making the best use of one's surroundings.**

The match begun, and Mai attacked quickly, bringing herself too close for the opponent to hit her back. Surprised, he tried to bearhug her, but his arms were slippery with sweat, and she managed to break free. She thrust one elbow upwards, straight towards his mouth. The hit was devastating. Two whole teeth and various fragments of others flew out of his mouth, together with a copious amount of blood. Her follow up broke his nose, and finished the deal. The hulking man was crouching on the ground, whining in pain like a baby.

The training sergeant ran towards the scene, alarmed, as soon as he realised something was wrong. Commander Red and his escort followed suit at a more leisurely pace.

"What just happened? Explain!"

"It's quite simple." said Mai. "I could not hope to win a fight of attrition. He had forgotten his mouth guard. So I finished this in a single strike."

The sergeant's face was flushed with anger. "This is unconscionable! This is cheating!"

Mai didn't flinch. "This is winning." she replied.

Commander Red broke into laughter. "This is what I want from our soldiers! Guts, creativity, and no mercy! Eye on the prize, eh, girl? I hope to hear good news from you. You'll get far in the Red Ribbon!"

Mai nodded, saluted, and hinted a smile. Staff Officer Black sent her a worried look, but said nothing. Embarrassed, the training sergeant mumbled something about acknowledging what obviously were the values of their army and maybe even a promotion.

She felt satisfied. This was right - inevitable, even. After all, this was how the world worked.

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Goku was slowly advancing in her direction, now. At regular intervals, he would clap his hands so fast that they produced a powerful shock wave. The sound was like the steps of a giant advancing towards her - a regular deafening boom getting closer. It worked as an active sonar for him, and disrupted the incoming bullets' flight just enough to kick them out the supersonic regime, at which point, they lost precision. Mai had missed all the shots of her last cartridge. She would try to time her shots so that they arrived right before the kid had time to clap again, when his previous one was dying down, but she also needed to not time them too precisely or they would be easy to dodge. In
addition, as Goku came closer, parallax made his sideways jumps more effective in throwing her aim off.

But he had been drawn away from the dragon by a few hundred metres now, so that was all just as planned.

Mai left the rifle on the side and quickly went back to the controls of the plane. In hovering mode, it was incredibly stable, and the jets did not emit much light. She had ripped off her coat and hung one half of it on either side of the plane to conceal them from Goku's view. Nothing could been done about the noise, but there was plenty already, with all the thunder falling from the clouds and now Goku's own defense technique, so she didn't worry too much about being pinpointed with that. Smoothly, slowly, she moved the plane just a dozen metres to the left. By this time, Goku must have noticed that the onslaught had stopped for longer than usual. She embraced the rifle again, took aim, shot.

The bullet whizzed past his cheek and left a red streak on his face. He had managed to dodge and disrupt it, but the unexpected change in direction had thrown him off.

Again. Mai went back to the controls and repeated the procedure, this time moving a bit back to the right. The same distance she could reasonably cover on foot in that same time frame. Chamber, aim, shoot. She got one in this time - in Goku's right arm. Relentless, the little monster ripped it off, kept clapping, kept advancing.

No problem. Now that she had established a pattern, it was time to break it and strike at her true objective.

She manoeuvred the plane at higher speed this time, and circled behind the dragon, letting its blinding light obfuscate the one produced by her jets. She positioned herself diametrically opposed to where she was before with respect to Goku, in approximately the same time that her much smaller movements had taken her before. She picked up the rifle and carefully took aim. Now she had all the advantages. Goku probably still expected the next hit from a place she could reasonably reach on foot. The disruptive effect of the clapping was minimised at his back. And she could see his spine, the nape of his neck, right in her scope. Until now, her bullets had only managed to penetrate no more than one centimeter deep into that kid's flesh.

If she could hit the right spot, that would suffice.

Mai took aim for a spot right above Goku's second cervical vertebra and shot.

The fall was endless and painful. It was like plunging through an ever denser mass of sharp gravel, needles and acid rain. And yet the awareness of the pain that would come after the fall urged the mind to treasure every instant, as every instant was the least painful you'd ever experience from that moment on. The worst of it was, just like her consciousness, every feeling was heightened, unimpeded. She didn't need a body to suffer harm in order to appreciate it, it was all directly telegraphed to her mind. This was not simply the occasional physical accident that is mundane pain, this was the essence of pain. This place was pain, and she was burrowing deeper and deeper into its rotten core.

A stench rose from the abyss. A stench of sulfur and blood and iron and burnt flesh and excrement and more.

Bulma screamed, and her scream was a chorus with that of the trillions below her.
They had ran for almost half an hour, or rather, the Ox King had. Pilaf had merely been perched on his shoulder, grabbing desperately his cape for added safety, too terrified by the speed at which the air slammed on his face to even feel the nausea from the continuous bobbing up and down and occasional sharp turns to avoid an obstacle. It sort of all came to a head when they halted, as the Ox King planted his feet in the ground and stopped with a screech and great raising of dust.

"Yer all right, Pilaf?"

"One, moment, please." he muttered, clearly not all right.

He climbed down from the man's shoulder, helped by his hand, and took a moment to assess the situation. The sky was still dark. They had travelled for a while, but neither Goku nor Mai were visible, and outside of the local circle of blinding light, it was hard to even see due to the sheer contrast. More importantly, the light rose from the Dragon Balls, gathered in a nice formation of seven on the ground. And from them, up, up and above, rose the...

"Dragon?" asked Pilaf, gaping in awe at the sky.

"No, I'm just a lizard who underwent a sudden growth spurt." boomed Shenlong's voice from above. "OF COURSE I'm the dragon! Heavens, you are even denser than the girl that was here earlier. Can any of you pathetic mortals just express a wish already and let me go my own way?"

Pilaf looked around alarmed. "Wait, the girl? The blue haired one? Where is she?"

The all-powerful dragon sighed. "I'm not even trying to get you to express that question as a wish. For the sake of the brevity of this conversation, she's there, at my feet. Except for the bits of her that are approximately one meter to the side."

Pilaf lowered his eyes and finally saw Bulma's corpse and her splattered brains.

"WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK, MAI!" he screamed.

A loud bang echoed through the air.

"Someone's shooting." the Ox King looked around, concerned. "Not good. The soldier woman must be around here. We need to take cover."

"Oh, no, you don't!" roared Shenlong "You're not just going to bail on me and hide somewhere! You're staying here until you express ONE DAMN WISH and then you mortals and your petty power squabbles can all go screw yourself once and for all! I've spent more time summoned today than any time in the past, combined! This is getting physically painful, and I didn't even know I could feel pain! SO YOU WILL ASK ME TO PERFORM A MIRACLE FOR YOU, UNDERSTOOD, YOU PATHETIC BLUE MIDGET?"

Pilaf stared at the creature in disbelief.

"Understood." he managed to whimper, at the end.

This was it. The moment he had fought so much for, delivered to him on a silver platter against the plans of both his rivals and his own ally-turned-traitor. Unlimited power, ready at his beck and call.

"Dragon," he started, "I wish..."
Power he would earn literally over his dead enemy's body.

"...for you to..."

Not too far, there was an explosion. Pilaf didn't hear it. He only heard his own voice, as it spelled the fatal words.

It was an average day.

Colonel Green's codename was one of the really obvious choices. He was literally green. Many of the Red Ribbon army soldiers were either human or some other kind of mammalian non-humans. This, however, was the first time that Mai met a pterodactyl serving in the force.

Sadly, since he was her own one-person court martial, the meeting wasn't likely to be especially cordial.

"According to article 35 of our code, in cases of particular urgency a superior officer can assume the full duty of assessing a case, judging the evidence, and dealing out punishment for insubordination on the battlefield. This has been invoked for your situation, Lieutenant Indigo. On my request." The old reptile put aside the files he was reading and his large beak twisted in a grimacing smile. "Assume that I know everything about the case already, and assume that your life and future in this army are in my hands. Tell me your version of the facts."

Mai stood on attention with a defiant look, but didn't hint at any other kind of reaction. "I was ordered by Major Crimson to tell my men to retreat when I believed one last push would conquer the position we were targeting. I refused to follow his orders. I pushed through, forcing the others to back me up to avoid disrupting our formation. I conquered the objective. I won the battle."

She paused for a second.

"I called him a feckless, lurid coward." she added.

She thought she saw Colonel Green barely suppress a chuckle, there. "I see. But I feel like there's more to this. We don't fight for glory, or our country, or an ideal. We are mercenaries: we fight when we're paid to do it. If your commander says to retreat, what's in it for you in disobeying? What was your real motivation, Lieutenant?"

Mai hesitated for a moment. "Permission to speak freely, sir?"

"Granted, of course."

"I believe the Red Ribbon as it is now is a waste of potential. We have immense power, great technology, brave and skilled soldiers. Yet all we do is act as the deciding factors in petty disputes between local powers, in a gray area in which the world government will tolerate our existence, if not acknowledge it entirely. A world government, I believe, we have enough power to topple."

She stared straight into Colonel Green's eyes.

"Strength that is not used is wasted, Colonel. That is what I believe."

Colonel Green broke into laughter. Of all the outcomes she considered when stepping into this office, this was not one of them. "Well said, Lieutenant. You passed my little test brilliantly. You are exactly what I was looking for. By the way, I completely agree with your assessment, Major Crimson
is a feckless, lurid coward, and I will see that he's removed. There are no means within the rules to do so, but when in battle, accidents happen all the time."

Mai could not believe her ears. Colonel Green got up from his desk and walked towards her.

"You see, Lieutenant," he put a hand on her shoulder and leaned in so that he could lower his voice, "there are people within the Ribbon who think very much like you, and who share certain... other objectives which might serve our purpose, and of which I will talk to you later. We used to be able to steer this organisation, but after the current Commander Red took charge, well. You know him. And Staff Officer Black isn't much better - far more competent, but not nearly as willing to make the hard calls as you or me. Now, we believe it is time to act, and we have set our eyes on a prize that would make our plans come to fruition much faster. Would you be willing to help us?"

Mai's eyes sparkled. She straightened up. "You don't even need to ask, sir."

The old lizard laughed again. "Wonderful! This mission will need a lot from you, but it will be best if left to someone who's as removed from any suspicion as possible. You will have to feign loyalty for a long time, and be far less insubordinate - for the sake of a greater good. Do you understand that? Now, I will have to order you shot for your actions - it would look suspicious otherwise, and this is all part of the plan. On the side, we will arrange things so that you can escape, and steal a significant amount of valuable capsules from our armoury on your way out. Then, we have tracked down a certain man whom you need to convince to fund a peculiar enterprise..."

The bullet missed. Barely. Goku was hurt, but one second later he had ripped the bullet out of his neck - right to the side of the spine - and had turned around. By this point he must have caught on that she was flying. Which meant he'd take the obvious countermeasure. Mai had seen it when he first arrived; a yellow, incredibly fast cloud he could apparently ride on...

Through her scope, she saw Goku shouting, calling something. The cloud came with a whoosh. At the speed that thing travelled at, she'd be exposed in seconds.

She pulled the bolt again, took aim. This was going to be her last shot. It was victory or death, in the next few instants.

Goku took off. He had spotted her now, probably had recognised the sound of the plane that he'd never heard from outside until now. He flew in a straight line - as if all his planning and strategising now was out of the window, and he could only pursue the simple objective of getting her. Maybe he was angry, it didn't matter. It was the perfect chance.

Mai shot. Goku was hit right in his chest, the bullet's speed compounding with his, and the recoil alone tossed him off his little magic cloud. She had waited for him to be close - he would have a few metres to fall before hitting the sharp, hard rocks below. She readied a second shot to finish him off.

The cloud made a loop in mid-air and pursued Goku, cushioning his fall and grabbing him just below. Mai fired frantically her second shot, but it missed and went right through the cloud, disappearing in a puff of yellow smoke. The cloud now zoomed towards her, Goku, half covered in blood but still plenty conscious, was charging in fist first, and suddenly there was no more time to try anything.

She resisted the instinct to close her eyes at the last moment.

The impact tore a clean hole through the hull of the plane. In a blaze of heat and fire, as the jet's
reactors exploded, Mai felt yanked violently upwards, so fast that she let her rifle go, and wondered for a second if that was how it felt to die, before realising all that had happened was that she had been pulled away. The plane was exploding below her; she was on the cloud, or rather, slightly above it, only lifted through a fold of her jacket that Goku was grabbing and kept lifted above his height.

Mai screamed incoherently in rage and extracted her side arm, unloading its entire cartridge point blank on Goku. He grabbed and deflected most bullets with his free hand, then wrestled the gun out of her hand, denting the metal with his fingers' clutch. Mai unclipped and armed the grenade she held at her belt, keeping it between their two bodies. With blinding speed, the kid broke her wrist by pinching it between his index and thumb, then deftly grabbed the grenade from her now limp and pained hand to toss it away, where it exploded harmlessly in mid-air.

"FUCKING DIE!" screamed Mai, flailing with her legs in an attempt to kick him, "OR FUCKING KILL ME ALREADY!"

She grabbed his arm with the hand that still worked and lifted herself to try and bite him. The kid shrugged it off with a quick gesture, hitting her on the side of the neck hard enough to stun her while leaving her conscious. Mai groaned in pain, but at this point, she was too groggy to do much else.

"I killed your friend," she mumbled, "why don't you just kill me?"

He didn't answer. The most enraging thing was that it looked like he wasn't even there - his eyes lost in the distance, his mind focused on some thought other than her. She wasn't even worth his attention?

Then it happened. All of a sudden, daylight burst into the sky again, as the dragon disappeared in a flash. The Dragon Balls rose into the air, hovered for a moment, then rocketed off into seven different directions.

Goku stared, and his expression, for the first time since he had destroyed Mai's plane, showed something.

A second later, he lost his footing and fell through the cloud. Mai was pulled by his weight, and hit the vaporous yellow stuff, and somehow was stopped by it. It was like laying down on a soft feather mattress, except a corner of her jacket passed right through it and was pulled by Goku's whole weight, as he was now dangling under her. She couldn't get up nor move. She was immobilised, face up, forced to look into the sky.

"What the hell is this?" she exclaimed.

"I lost focus." said Goku "But you really want to kill me that much. You have nothing else in your mind, apparently. Your heart is pure."

"Sure I do! I want to kill you like I did your friend! And I don't know what happened to the dragon - but she can't come back now! Feel like killing me yet?"

She wished she could see his expression, but he was under her, under the cloud. So all she could hear was his voice - a neutral, detached tone.

"No."

And suddenly, the weight pulling her down was gone. Mai rolled on her back and peered over the cloud, just to see him falling, spinning his body in a position of least resistance to accelerate and direct his motion, pointing as much as he could towards the place where Bulma should have been.
He hit the ground running - a small, black, careless dot.

Mai remained alone on the Kintoun for a moment, in the vast empty sky. There was, finally, silence. Her body was in pain, her ears ringing, her head empty after so much struggle and rage. She had no purpose, no pride, no face to present to those who had counted on her success. For the first time in her life, she felt the full extent of her weakness.

*Your heart is pure.*

She started laughing. At first a chuckle, then a loud, hysterical laugh, and as she laughed, she lost her footing on the cloud, fell through, fell to the ground, still laughing and laughing, until she hit.

The only thing she could appreciate, for a while, suspended in a mere dream state, was the lack of pain. Then, as her brain got accustomed to it, and recovered from the shock, she regained consciousness, and saw Goku's eyes peering over her.

Bulma screamed. "Goku! You've been killed too?"

"It's fine."

"It's okay now. I'm alive. And you're too."

She stopped for a moment, trying to reorganise her thoughts - something that now felt, again, surprisingly difficult and sluggish. She got up sitting, pushing against the ground to lift herself. One of her hands felt like it was touching something warm and sticky, and as she checked, she realised she'd just plunged her fingers into her own formerly owned brains - which caused her a moment of existential confusion immediately followed by a strong need to puke.

She did puke.

When she finally felt like she had a grip on her physical body again, she looked around, feeling the air and all those other tiny sensations on her skin and through her body.

"Thank you." she said, looking at Goku. "Thankyouthankyouthankyou OH MY GOD THANK YOU YOU HAVE NO IDEA WHAT IT WAS LIKE!"

By this time, the kid had to push her away a bit to loosen her tight hug which was getting really quite painful for his sore, bleeding body.

"I'm glad you're happy," he said, "but it's not me you should thank. It's him."

Bulma followed the finger Goku was using to point in some direction, saw Pilaf at the end, checked back the finger, followed it again, Pilaf again, put herself behind Goku, lining her eyes up with his finger as if it was a sextant, still Pilaf.

"Him?" she asked, incredulous.

"Ever so grateful, aren't you?" scoffed the blue imp. "Do not concern yourself. We have no appreciation for the likes of you, but let it never be said that we do not take responsibility for the misguided actions of our followers."

"He's a softie is what he is!" laughed the Ox King, uproariously, "But I like that. Gotta be ready to know when to be magnanimous when yer a King."

"You regularly decapitate people with an axe for trespassing." pointed out Pilaf.
The giant shrugged. "Eh, being a King ain't easy."

Bulma looked at Pilaf transfixed for a second, running scenarios in her head trying to figure out what the hell could have happened while she was dead. Then she bent herself in a perfect bow.

"Thank you," she said, "Your Majesty."

"Well, uh, ah," stuttered Pilaf, confused, "it's nothing, really. Let's not make this awkward."

She got up.

"I agree," she said with a smile, "let's not."

She asked about what had happened, and Goku and Pilaf both recounted their own experiences. They also recovered and replayed the camera's memory card, which had recorded the entire thing, including Bulma's death and resurrection. All said and done, they got a picture of the whole timeline. When asked, she told about how the dragon had considered her first wish impossible to grant in its current form, and how the entire thing had taken so long as to allow Mai to catch up in the first place, and this part of the story was found to be very funny by Pilaf. They tried a few guesses at what Mai's own intentions for a wish to express may have been, but they could come up with nothing. They assumed that given her Red Ribbon past it may have something to do with granting more power or resources to them, and this could have been a covert mission for her, but then Bulma encouraged to not speculate too much and risk closing one's mind to alternatives without adequate information, Goku agreed, and the matter was dropped. She didn't recount anything of her experience after her death, though, and any questions about that soon were understood to be a taboo. Both her first reaction after her resurrection and her current silence suggested it hadn't been pleasant - though of course, that excited everyone's curiosity even more.

"What now?" asked Goku, finally. "You know that the Dragon Balls work, but you didn't get your wish. I still am not sure whether I should use them to bring back to life my grandpa or for something else, and as we discussed whether there is an afterlife at all..."

"There is," said Bulma. "I can tell you that much. Sorry, I need... time before discussing that properly. There's so much inside my head right now, I'm just trying to shut it all down."

"Oh," the kid pondered for a moment. "Then we need to talk about it. It may affect my decision. Either way, if you don't mind, I will stick with you for a while."

"Mind? I need you to!" laughed Bulma. "We have so much work to do. I need to figure out a lot of stuff, understand how you and your power work, and also find a way to make myself immortal!"

"Immortal? How so?" asked Pilaf, smugly. "Did you and your charming personality manage to stir so much trouble with the gods of the underworld in the short time during which you were dead, they've now sworn to throw you in Hell if you so much as show up there again?"

"Look," snapped back Bulma, "I had a very good reason at the time!"

The only thing she could appreciate, for a while, suspended in a mere dream state, was the acute, burning pain. Then, as her brain got accustomed to it, and recovered from the shock, she regained consciousness, and saw Colonel Green's eyes peering over her.

Mai blinked. "I'm still alive, am I?"
"Yes, you are, Lieutenant Indigo. Well, we should really get you a new codename now since you're not in the Ribbon any more." he added with a quiet chuckle.

She was in a bed, inside some kind of mobile hospital vehicle. She tried to get up, and couldn't immediately. Her right arm especially felt sluggish, dizzy, and burned ferociously at the shoulder whenever she put some weight on it.

"Careful," said the pterodactyl, "that's a prosthetic arm. Some of your body was too mangled to recover. You took one serious fall, Lieutenant. I expect a full report soon."

The woman lowered her eyes. "I failed," she said in a raspy, pained voice, "because I was weak. That's all the report you need. You may as well kill me now."

"And waste all the good work and money spent on putting you back together? Nonsense." The reptile looked at her with an inscrutable expression. "Mai, you've just entered our organisation, and yet you already embody our ideals so well - perhaps too much so. You must learn to be more elastic. Strength always triumphs in the end, and yet the weak can use their own cowardly, underhanded methods to earn some fleeting, temporary wins. We would not be trying to rescue and free our Maestro again if it was not so. I knew that you had been defeated, or I would not have found you bloody, mutilated, beaten to an inch of your life in the middle of the desert. That was three days ago, by the way, right after one of our spy satellites picked up the dragon being summoned. But I also know that whatever the Dragon Balls have been used for, it's not something that has put a final stop on our plans. And that fool, Pilaf, is not King yet. So you must have done something. I am still ready to believe in you being a potential capable member of our organisation... conditionally, let's say."

Mai shook her head. "You don't get it, Colonel. That wasn't cowardly or underhanded. I was beaten, fair and square, by a straight up monster."

"Then all the more reason to make a full report." said Colonel Green. "That sounds like a potential danger. We believe in strength, but not all those who are strong do. And those hypocrites who don't, more than all, must be suppressed."

She answered nothing to this. She finally managed to get up, and take a full look at her new body. Most of it was like the old one - but where she could see her skin, it was covered in stitches and bruises, and where she couldn't, she felt them due to the continuous throbbing pain. But her right arm was cold metal now. She commanded it to move, with her thought, and it did. The fingers followed her every order with unerring precision. She realised she could probably do all that she'd ever learned to do with it - even more, perhaps. She had a sense of touch and of pain through it too, but it was dulled, and she thought that might actually be a feature. Once she got used to it she could react and protect it from harm without ever being paralysed by extreme pain. She gripped the edge of the bed, squeezed hard, and realised her newfound strength when she saw that her fingers had left dents into the metal.

"This is amazing." she muttered. "What is this from?"

"The Ribbon's science division, and specifically, our most genius bionicist, Dr. Gero." answered the Colonel. "Such spare parts for wounded soldiers are now standard issue to all our units. Too bad that the good Doctor himself isn't a member of our faction, he would be a great asset. But I'm afraid he's too taken with his scientific interests to be a reliable follower of any kind of higher ideal. The only thing he could earnestly put his life on the line for would be revenge on someone taking his funding from him." he concluded with a chuckle.

"Where are we going now?"
"I rescued you under the guise of a regular Red Ribbon operation," explained the other, "but of course, I can't bring you into just any of our bases, with your status as a defector. We will take you to a prison facility that is entirely controlled by our own - oh, yes, Lieutenant, we do have that much sway. It may have been a good thing that you didn't succeed this time. By next year, we will be in an even better position and will be able to move in full daylight. We won't need any subterfuge any more. Anyway, you'll be technically a prisoner there, but don't worry, you will have plenty of freedom. You will recover, and train, and have a chance to better learn about us, what we believe, and what we want. Oh, and, what is your favourite musical instrument?"

Mai blinked, confused by the sudden jump in topic. "I'm sorry, sir, what?"

The colonel laughed. "For your new codename, Lieutenant. After all, as we say: he is our Maestro, and we are but his Instruments. Mine is Piano, by the way. You can call me that from now on."

She stared into nothing for a while. "I don't know. I have never spent much time thinking about music. Choose one that you believe suits me, sir."

"Well, I say we go with Violin, then. Feels more... feminine."

"Won't you run out of names at some point?" asked the newly baptised Violin.

"We certainly have a lot of duplicates. But since we're not the type of organisation where you have frequently large assemblies of people talking all together, confusion is seldom an issue. By the way, you should know our salute before you get into the base. Will make you fit in quicker. Bit of a ritual, builds a sense of comradeship and all that. So, when you see someone that you know for sure is one of our members, and providing you're absolutely, positively alone or only in presence of other known members, you beat your chest with your fist, like this," he demonstrated, "and then hold it in place, with the arm horizontal, like this. One of you says, He is our Maestro, and the other responds, And we are but his Instruments. And then both, all together: The world to the strong. Let's try this."

Mai moved her right arm, and she realised she had to exercise more care than she usually would have not to hurt her own chest when doing the gesture. Still, it came out pretty okay.

"He is our Maestro," said Piano.

"And we are but his Instruments," followed suit Violin.

The reptile smiled.

"The world to the strong!" said their voices in unison.

The mobile hospital van kept running on a sandy road, towards the hidden prison base.

Chapter End Notes

And here it is, the final chapter of the Pilaf saga! This was really dense and really long, but I couldn't really find a good point where I felt like breaking it in two, so here we are. It also pretty much sets up a series of conflicts that you can imagine will have very far reaching consequences.

For anyone wondering: yes, Piano is THAT Piano. If you know Dragon Ball well enough, you should know who he is and who he serves, though his name is almost
never said out loud in the original. What I did with him and his faction is a huge retcon compared to the original story, really, but I felt it was necessary to create more grounded motives for them, and also fix some inconsistencies that otherwise arise later in Dragon Ball Z (due, I'm sure, to Toriyama not originally planning all future developments).

As I said, I'm going into a bit of a hiatus now. The upcoming arc will be significantly more light-hearted than this chapter. I'm still in the planning phase but should get down to writing soon. I can't promise a specific update date, but hopefully in a month or so I'll be up to speed again. See you soon, and thanks for the reviews and kudos!
Cake and the city

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the idea and characters of Dragon Ball are owned by Akira Toriyama. This is a simple non-profit fan parody.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 10 - Cake and the city

If departures are often tinted by excitement, returns are affairs usually pointed by either melancholy or weariness. Having come back from a metaphorical and literal trip through Hell and back, Bulma felt very little of the former, and an extremely concentrated dose of the latter. With an eye on the instrumentation she counted every single kilometre that separated her from home, her house, her things, even her obnoxious parents. They all seemed so far away by now, they barely felt real, even after just two weeks of globetrotting.

It is also said that you never truly return from a trip, because the you that comes back is not the same that departed. That, too, was a feeling Bulma was acutely aware of. Besides the part of her grey matter that had literally been magically replaced by a dragon deity after having been shot out by a renegade mercenary sniper, her entire worldview had been shaken to the core. She wanted to rest, sure; but she also was not sure whether she could rest, at this point, or ever again. There was so much to do. And nothing exemplified all the things which had completely revolutionised her world quite as much as the little boy who was sleeping, curled up in the seat next to her, snoring slightly, a magical wooden staff thrown across his shoulders and a monkey's tail dangling out of his trousers and occasionally reacting with small involuntary contractions, perhaps as he dreamed, either of the music of the celestial spheres or of punching someone.

Bulma grabbed the boy's unruly hair and gently pulled it. He opened his eyes.

"What happened?" he mumbled, still sleepy.

"Nothing. But there's something interesting I want to show you."

Goku opened his eyes wide, suddenly attentive. "Where is it?"

"Not yet here. In a moment."

The kid pulled up on his chair, and one second later he seemed so fresh you wouldn't have been able to tell he was sleeping soundly just until moments ago.

"Is that our destination?" Goku pointed at a red dot on the navigation map that was getting discernibly closer at every moment. "Looks like we're almost there."

"Yes, just a few minutes now. And boy, am I happy to return home. Well, I am the one who's returning, of course." Bulma glanced at the compass, then slightly veered to the right. "For you, the trip is just beginning. There's so much I need to show you! In fact, I look forward to it. It'll be so much fun!"
She chuckled, but Goku stayed unfazed.

"I don't know if I'm going to be that surprised, you know." he said, brooding. "I have already gotten used to a lot of things. I had never seen capsules or flown, but now these are normal things to me. If I think about it, it's almost sad how quickly the novelty wears out."

"You sound like an old man." Bulma made a grimace that was her best impression of an old toothless granny. "You're supposed to be younger than me! You're, what? Thirteen, fourteen?"

Goku shrugged, and Bulma let the question fall.

"Anyway," she continued, "don't be too jaded. I'm ready to bet that I can still amaze you like never before!"

"But," Goku made a thoughtful face, "I wonder if any of that will truly help me understand better what I would or should do with a wish from the dragon. Perhaps it just is not something one can ever be sure about. I can not even decide what would be right to do about my grandfather, for example, your rather outrageous account of the afterlife notwithstanding."

"Don't start again with that!" cried Bulma, exasperated. "You've made your opinion quite clear. Of all people, I swear, that you wouldn't believe me..."

"I am just applying what you taught me." said the boy, calmly. "That claims require to be backed up by evidence, especially if they are extraordinary. It would not be epistemologically sound if I just let my friendship affect my judgement."

"How intellectually honest of you." snarled the girl. "You're really a great pupil. I swear, I get it, in principle I understand your point of view, but when you study the scientific method and learn to be wary of anecdotal evidence they never really bother taking into account the anecdotal evidence's feelings!"

"You said you could give me proof anyway."

"I said I could give you evidence." corrected Bulma. "Not final proof, perhaps, but I can make a verifiable prediction that could back up a part of my story. If that happens, I would really like it if at that point you brought into the whole thing also a little bit of trust."

Goku looked out of the window, carefully avoiding Bulma's eyes. "We'll see." he said, noncommittally.

"Yeah, that really reassures me. Let's forget about this business for now. Time for some amazement. Remember when we were in Oolong's village, and you asked me if that paltry assembly of a couple dozen people in mud huts was a city?"

"Yes."

"Well, open your eyes and look down there, as soon as we turn around that mountain."

Goku looked, and his usually plain expression slowly morphed into pure awe. His eyes widened and his jaw fell open.

In front of him were 600 squared kilometres of roads and concrete; thousands of skyscrapers over 100 metres tall, culminating in spherical summits; hundreds of thousands of vehicles, cars and planes, zipping across the buildings, their lights leaving streaks and trails in the darkening air of the twilight; and more than seven million people and their whole lives.
"That" said Bulma "is a city. West City. Welcome to my home."

Having lived for more than twenty years in the same house as her husband, Mrs. Panchy Briefs had made it a habit of hearing strange noises yet being unfazed by them. So, for example, on that day, she was baking a juicy sachertorte when she heard a mighty explosion that shook the house to its foundations.

"Honey," she asked, probing the cake with a toothstick to check whether it was ready, "is that you?"

"Yes, nothing to worry about, cutie pie!" answered a voice from the environmental speakers. "By the way, where did you put the fire extinguisher in the organic synthesis laboratory?"

"Oh, I believe it's under the fume hood table." she sighed. "You always leave those things where I trip on them."

The speakers went back to playing relaxing nature noises mixed to random musical chords, and Panchy decided that the sachertorte could still use five minutes in the oven.

Later on that day, Panchy had just washed her voluminous blonde hair, and was now applying hair mousse to keep it voluminous (the blondeness, thankfully, was still all natural). A blaring siren sound made her jump ever so slightly on her chair, but she quickly composed herself.

"Honey," she asked, still twisting her hair curls between her fingers, "is that you?"

"Yes, everything under control, cutie pie!" answered the speakers again. "Anyway, it would probably be safer if you didn't breathe for the next thirty seconds or so."

Panchy had to delay the inevitable sigh for a while, as she apparently needed the oxygen. She didn't mind too much anyway, as she couldn't stand the smell of the hair mousse. The music from the speakers was overcome by the noise of the powerful venting system kicking in and expelling all the air in the house to replace it with fresh one from outside. She was sure she had left some napkins out in the open in the kitchen - now that was going to be a disaster, they would fly all over the place.

It had come time to water the plants in the greenhouse when the powerful whoosh of landing jets almost made her spill some of it on the floor.

"Honey," she asked, with only the slightest hint of annoyance, "is that you?"

"No!" came a surprised voice from the speakers "It must be Bulma."

"It hasn't been Bulma for a while." pointed out the woman.

"Approximately two weeks, cutie pie. Go check on her."

Panchy left the watering can next to the greenhouse's door and reached the house's entrance. After thinking a bit about it, she went back to the kitchen, cut a big slice out of the freshly made sachertorte, and put it into a nice porcelain container, then walked back to the entrance. That nothing says home like a slice of handmade cake was one of her dearest beliefs.

Even before reaching the entrance, she heard the first thing that genuinely surprised her in that whole day - Bulma was chatting.

With a boy.
"...and how can they all eat anyway? The land is not enough!"

"Well, we import food from farmlands all over the world, there's thousands of trucks and trains that every day... hold on."

Bulma walked to the corridor door, stealthily, then suddenly opened it with a quick movement. Panchy stood in the arch, the porcelain container in one hand, smiling.

"Oh, please, I didn't want to interrupt." she said. "You seemed adorable."

"You've heard us for all of fifteen seconds and we were talking about the logistics of urbanisation, so I seriously doubt that." answered Bulma, sour. "What? Is this your welcome, mom, after I'm back from a two weeks long trip during which I intentionally avoided all communication with you?"

Panchy stood silent for a second, dumbfounded. "I brought cake!" she said finally, holding up the porcelain box.

"Well, thanks, that settles it!" Bulma threw her hands into the air. "Were you not worried? Not even a little?"

"Oh, my girl is super smart. I'm sure you can fend for yourself. Don't you agree she's smart too?" she said, addressing Goku.

"I do not have enough experience to compare her with a reasonable average," answered the kid, "but for what it's worth, she certainly seems very capable to me, if a bit reckless."

"Don't you help her now!" hissed Bulma under her breath.

"What? Am I supposed to say that you're stupid instead?" asked Goku puzzled.

"Yes! I mean no! Just say nothing at all. You will make things worse."

"He talks like a book!" squealed Panchy, delighted. "Bulma, where did you find yourself such a cute and clever boyfriend?"

"He's not my boyfriend!" snapped back the girl.

"I'm a boy and her friend," specified Goku, "but not for the purpose of mating."

"GOKU, I SWEAR IF YOU SAY ANOTHER WORD..."

The woman chuckled. "You're bantering! You're basically a couple already. You know what, I think I will leave you to it. Show your boyfriend around, Bulma, I'm sure you can have a lot of fun. Your father is downstairs in the lab as usual. You'll tell me how you met later, but good job there, I was really beginning to worry for you, you know?"

At this point, Bulma Briefs exploded.

"Oh, now THAT makes you worry!" she shrieked "Not the fact that I disappeared for two weeks after spending months studying old tomes and mumbling stuff about ancient lost magic and summoning eldritch dragon gods! Not the fact that I did not give any news of myself for all this time, and that at least three people tried to kill me, and one succeeded!"

Panchy at this seemed about to interject, but was submerged by her daughter's now completely unbridled outburst.
"Scratch that - I'm not explaining it, you'll have to figure it out by yourself. No, what made you really worry was the prospect that I could possibly end up a lonely spinster and never give you a grandchild - the horror! So yes, whatever, if this is what you want to hear from me, sure! Goku is my boyfriend, we had a long romantic holiday together, and now I'm not showing him around the house, we're going upstairs to my bedroom and staying in there for the rest of the afternoon!"

And said this, she snatched the dish with the sachertorte from her mother's hand, made a half turn on her heels and walked towards the stairs, pulling Goku behind her by one arm, basically dragging him.

"And if it wasn't clear," she screamed when she was midway up the ramp, "WE'RE HAVING SEX!"

"Well you be careful, Bulma." said Panchy, melodious. "I can do without a grandchild until you're a bit older."

"I didn't get that." said Goku, who had been reduced to silence by the unfamiliar feeling of not having the faintest idea of what the hell everyone was talking about. "What are we having?"

"Cake." muttered Bulma, throwing him a furious look. "We're having cake."

Goku wasn't sure what cake was either, but at this point he didn't feel like asking was the best course of action.

"Welcome home, Bulma!" said Dr. Briefs’ cheerful voice through the speakers.

"You heard all of that, didn't you, dad?" asked Bulma. "Why didn't you say anything? What's your excuse?"

A long silence. "It felt like a very mother-daughter thing." said the speakers, finally.

"Ha, sure, dad. Whatever. I need to perform some rather advanced data queries and analysis, I'm going to access the Capsule Corporation servers, do you have a problem with that?"

"Not at all. In fact," he added, "you might help me put Caroline to the test."

"Caroline? What, you have a secretary now?"

"In a manner of speaking, sweetie." said the man. "Caroline is our new AI assistant. She runs the servers and handles data access, plus is an excellent help around the house. Caroline, say hello to Bulma!"

There was a second of static, then the speakers talked with a calm, smooth, feminine voice: "Hello, Bulma. Nice to meet you. I'm Caroline, and I will assist you in your searches."

The girl frowned a bit. "Uh, nice to meet you, Caroline. Dad, how intelligent are we talking about? Should I worry about not hurting her feelings or making her work unreasonably?"

"Nothing that drastic, don't worry, sweetie. She's absolutely safe. Her hardware is very powerful, but it's overkill; she's just clever enough to pass for a human in a trivial conversation, is all. And anyway, she's boxed out in her own machine and does not have any admin passwords to the vital stuff. If she were to try and make three mistakes on any of them, there's a physical switch that will explode and destroy her hard drive."

"You do realise" said Bulma, alarmed, "that the fact that you felt the need to install these security
features is not reassuring, yes?"

Dr. Briefs paused for a moment. "She's safe," he repeated. "What is it that you wanted to access anyway?"

"The Radio Astronomy Monitoring database."

"Oh, but you don't have access credentials, now, do you? You can use my account. The password is yours, mine, and your mother's birth dates hashed together with a MD5 algorithm and chained with..."

"The password is 'bubblegum'." interrupted Bulma. "At least the one I set up for my backdoor account when I cracked the system for fun one year ago. And you shouldn't set up paranoid security systems with ludicrously complicated passwords if then you're going to spell them out on a wireless unencrypted speaker system that anyone could listen to, Caroline included."

"Oh, dear." said Dr. Briefs after a moment's thought. "Now I have to change them all over again."

The speakers shut down. Bulma pinched her forehead and took a deep breath, then sighed loudly.

"Are you alright?" asked Goku.

"Sure." she shook her head, and led Goku to her room. "Let's look for that evidence I promised."

——————

Goku's jaded certainty that he would not be amazed by anything any more quickly crumbled in front of the various items he found inside Bulma's room - in turn a Newton's cradle, a plasma ball lamp, a slinky, and a giant bunny plushie that was, in his own words, "the softest thing he had ever touched". Bulma suggested that if he wanted to, he could keep it, given that her recent experiences with rabbits made her feel uncomfortable about sleeping with one in her bed; that brought back some memories that made Goku gloomy, so in order to cheer him up and make up for her blunder, Bulma introduced him to the wonderful world of toy drones. Goku recognised it as something similar to what Shu had used to invite them to Pilaf's palace, except this time he could control it. It took him a few minutes to get the hang of it, and then he was able to fly it almost perfectly. His hand-eye coordination and sense for precision movements were so brilliant that Bulma started dreading the possibility of ever introducing him to videogames, and whether that would mean creating with her own hands a monster that she would never be able to beat. Regardless, she needed to turn the computer on now, and not for the sake of playing. After booting was over, Caroline's beautiful voice resonated throughout the room.

"Hello, Bulma. What do you want to do today?"

"Please access the Radio Astronomy Monitoring database for me. Give me a prompt to input the credentials."

"Understood. Did you know? Passwords entered through this system are encrypted end-to-end and I can not read them."

"Fantastic." Bulma quickly typed something and pressed the return key. "Do your thing."

Goku walked up to the girl's chair, casually commanding the drone with one hand so it would hover placidly around his head.

"What are you doing? Is it about the evidence you mentioned?"
"Indeed it is. I'll have to explain this one. Remember when I talked to you about electromagnetic waves, how they travel and all that?" "Yes, pretty much." confirmed Goku.

"Perfect. Caroline, show us the radio astronomy sites map."

A low colour world map appeared on the screen, a few dots here and there coloured in bright red. "This is a map showing the positions of the main satellite dish facilities owned by Capsule Corporation. These are big antennas, devices meant to receive electromagnetic waves from space. We use them for communication, mostly; to record radio waves sent by our own devices in space. Remember space?"

"The place where you said this Frieza guy is?" asked tentatively the kid.

"That, but this part of it is much closer. It's just a few kilometres above our heads. You could get there with your cloud in a few minutes if you travelled upwards... uh, now that I think about it, that's an interesting experiment to make. Anyway. Thing is, now and then, we've happened to catch some signals that covered and mixed up our transmissions. Any guesses as to what that was?"

Goku thought about it for a while. "Other transmissions?"

"Not all of them. Most were just random natural phenomena - stars and stuff. But some did indeed sound suspiciously like transmissions from space. Which seemed a pretty big deal to us, so we set up a radio astronomy program - using our satellite dishes to scan the entire sky and see where and when did these disturbances come from."

"But if they're from space, does that mean there's other people up there who uses the same machines to communicate that you do?"

"Similar ones, at least." Bulma shrugged. "But thing is, we never got definite proof. We certainly mapped the disturbances, and we had a strong feeling that they were artificial in nature, but couldn't decode any of them. So we couldn't rule out that they were just some random natural form of noise. Weird, but possible. Now however we have something to search for. Caroline!"

"Yes, Bulma?" answered promptly the AI.

"Perform a phonetic match search. Tolerance level medium, pattern spelling: F-R-I-E-Z-A."

"As you wish."

The computer started processing, and a progress bar appeared on screen.

"Prediction:" announced Bulma, "if I am not lying, that name must be an important conversation topic out there, and must appear in a number of them. I know that's how it's pronounced because I was told that explicitly."

"You could have heard it sometimes while searching the database," suggested Goku, "and then dug it up from your memory for your vision."

"Ha-ha, clever but no. The entire database is several terabytes of audio data, more than I could have listened to in multiple times my life. We must always search it automatically. So if it pops up in enough different soundbites, it's going to be highly unlikely or outright impossible that I did the extrapolation work all on my own. It's not water tight, but I hope you can take this as a serious enough hint that there's at least something true in my story."

Goku thought about it a bit. "I agree," he concluded, "the only alternative I see is if you were trying
to deceive me, and I don't think you would do that."

"Your trust is touching. Now let's wait for a few minutes."

Bulma tapped her fingers nervously and kept throwing glances at the progress bar as it filled, hoping that somehow her extremely intense stare would speed up the process. Goku had his drone perform loop de loops, a feat it was never designed for. It managed two before crashing on Bulma's head due to having spent too long in a stall position.

"Will you stop... oh, it's finished!"

An endless list of hits filled the screen. The confidence for each match exceeded 95% as far as she could see.

"What the..." Bulma kept pushing the down arrow and scrolling the list, and the matches were still almost perfect. The total number apparently was over ten thousand.

"That's a lot." commented Goku.

"No joke. Let's try listening to one."

The sound was disturbed, but they could still distinguish some structured vocalisations amidst all the white noise. It was that they necessarily sounded like voices, but they definitely sounded like something. They would say something resembling a normal syllable, and then just a bunch of unpronounceable noises. And then they said Frieza. It was distinctly recognisable amidst all the gibberish. One, two, three times; they seemed to speed up their talking, even, as if they were getting heated up.

Bulma pushed the cursor a few lines down. "Let's try another."

In this one, the voices were far more high pitched. Their pronunciation was sharp, long and slightly broken, more like Freee-za, but it was still obviously the same word.

Bulma quickly skimmed through the next few clips. They heard voices that sounded like wet gurgling and shrill metallic scratching, fast and slow, but all of them managed in their own way to pronounce that word; Frieza. Bulma also noticed that many of these, even from different vocal apparatuses, seemed to speak in patterns that had something in common among themselves. If there was a universal lingua franca, there was some hope of at least capturing the essentials of its phonetics and syntax by running a cross-referencing analysis over the entire database. They had tried something like that, of course, and some correlation was found, but she should go over it again and run more in-depth analyses now that she was reasonably sure there actually was something to it.

"They sound scared." observed Goku, fascinated. These two voices were like the frantic clicking of a telegraph.

"Don't let appearances deceive you." warned him Bulma. "You're anthropomorphising and projecting your expectations on them. We don't know how these aliens sound normally, what are their cues. It's impossible to tell if they're scared, happy, or what."

"I see." the boy nodded. "But can we tell then if this Frieza person is truly dangerous? For all we know, they may be praising how wise and just his rule is."

"Heh, doubt that, just out of a reasonable statistic extrapolation for emperors, overlords and tyrants of various sorts." said Bulma, sneering. "But good point anyway. I think I know how to check. Caroline, compute basic statistical measures and a monthly time histogram of pattern occurrence
frequency for all sources."

"Running now." answered the machine.

"I'm having it compute a few stats on these results." explained the girl, spinning her chair backwards to face Goku. "Some of these sources have been recorded constantly throughout the years, but some have disappeared."

"If they were killed by him," said Goku, "you expect them to have mentioned his name right before the end?"

"Yes, obviously. They would be giving orders, trying to mount a resistance, something. Hold on. Here's the results. Average life of each source after the name is first detected: ten years, which is pretty good considering we've been recording only for twelve, but that includes a lot of sources that are simply still emitting, and not all of them have been recorded since the beginning of the program. Number of disappeared sources where the name is detected with a highly increased frequency right before the disappearance..."

She became pale.

"That can't be right. Not in such a short time."

Goku tried to read the screen, but there were too many numbers. Bulma silently pointed at a spot in the screen, where the result was.

19.

"Nineteen planets? That's more than one per year." muttered Goku. "Is that a lot?"

"A lot? Goku, a planet is... we're on a planet, okay? Everything you've ever seen, everyone you've ever met, is just in a small corner of one single planet. Imagine all of that, and all that you've never seen in this world, destroyed. Times nineteen."

Goku was silent for a moment. "I can't." he concluded.

"Exactly. Fuck. Fuckfuckfuckfuck. We need to start figuring stuff out. We needed to start, like, yesterday. Let's go downstairs and begin." Bulma got up from her chair brusquely, sending it spinning. She then turned to Goku, and saw him fidgeting with his hands, very composed, but his eyes were sort of straying here and there.

"You want to say something." she stated. "What is it? I can give you five minutes. Tops."

"That thing you said we're having..." started the boy.

Bulma squinted. "Cake."

"That. Can I see what it is? I'm curious. I know it's important to go but..."

"Oh, yeah, no problem. It's just a really good thing you can eat. It's there."

She pointed at the porcelain container that she had taken from her mom's hands. Goku carefully lifted the lid, and found himself in front of a wonderfully smelling, still warm slice of sachertorte, oozing melted chocolate and apricot jam. He gulped audibly.

"It does not seem healthy." he said, weakly.
"Goku, with your feats, you probably have the metabolism of a small power plant, and I swear I'm going to give you the workout of your life today. So just wolf down the damn thing and don't think about it for once."

"Ok. Here I go..."

Now that she had finished baking, caring for her hair, and gardening, Panchy could finally get some well-deserved rest in her couch, watching her favourite TV program. Like an old friend, the host, Mrs. Homely, appeared on screen and announced today's topics. They would interview a master baker, discuss an innovative permanent technology with one of the chemists that had created it, and report from the annual Best Flowerbed Championship. The opening theme had just started playing when an exalted cry echoed from upstairs.

"SO GOOD!" screamed the boyish voice.

Panchy smiled and shook her head. Ah, to be young!

"Experimental subject #1!" Bulma, arms spread, stood in the middle of a vast underground lab, littered with heavy equipment bolted into the floor and smaller devices mounted on carts. "Herein begins our scientific venture. You have the privilege of being the first test subject in what will possibly be mankind's most important journey of discovery since the taming of fire. In these rooms, we will unlock the deepest secrets of power, push the human body beyond its limits, seek the strength necessary to defend this planet from any evildoer who might want it gone, and ultimately aim at defeating death itself! In you, subject #1, is the potential to do all this! It will not be easy, nor painless, nor quite as safe as the standards of ethics-approved academic research would require it to be. But here, subject #1, we write history! Today, I declare open the Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program!"

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 1

"That sounded like you may have set yourself some exceedingly tall objectives." observed Goku.

"Always start ambitious!" proclaimed Bulma, proudly, arms perched against her sides. "If you don't shoot high, you will get nothing at all."

"I see your point. But what's this about not being safe?"

"Oh, that. I don't have any machines dedicated to measuring human strength," explained the girl, "and even if I did, I doubt they'd have enough range to measure yours. So we're going to improvise with these around here. I'll build new stuff more fit for purpose as we go."

The room was littered with massive, extremely tough-looking devices. Most of them looked like the maws of mechanical monsters, full of jagged teeth and tubular ligaments and muscles made of hydraulic pistons ready to clench and chew.

"What are these used for usually?" asked Goku.
"Uh, crushing concrete, ripping metal bars to shreds." answered the other casually. "That sort of stuff."

"Why would you do that?"

"To test how resistant they are. Naturally," she hurriedly added, "with you we will take a different approach. Now, we need to decide on a working plan. First, let's fix our objectives. I already stated mine. Do you have anything that you plan to obtain? It would be nice to work around your interests too."

Goku thought about it a bit. "I have never considered my strength as anything unusual." he said. "So I would need to know how exactly it is different from yours to know better what to look for. But if you think I have some special factor or power within me, I guess understanding it better would help me create new techniques."

Bulma had pulled out a notebook and started writing down. "Alright. That sounds feasible. Anything that you're interested in on a more... theoretical level? Some specific knowledge you would like to acquire?"

The boy shrugged. "To lack knowledge also often means to lack knowledge of what is best to know. I can not tell beforehand what will interest me. If I have to think of something - I already know my body very well; I would not be much of a martial artist otherwise. But it would perhaps be more correct to say, my body knows itself. My conscious self knows little about those workings, except how to instinctively rely on them. Any more explicit knowledge could be both useful and dangerous to me."

Bulma frowned. "Dangerous? How so?"

"Overthinking slows down reactions, in battle." explained Goku. "My grandpa always said, if you ever think that you should use a certain technique, don't. The only right technique to use is the one you don't even have to think about. Knowledge alone is not sufficient to reach that stage - that is mastery. Something he really had much more than me."

"Well, so you will have to be wise about this - something I believe you shouldn't have much trouble with. Good thing that you shouldn't really fight anyone in the foreseeable future. But that's some excellent starting points for our work! Understanding your body is something that definitely falls within my interests too, so we can work on that. This also gives me some pointers on where to start for your education."

"Education?"

"Well, sure. Books, Goku. Loads and loads of books for you to read. I'll work you to the bone with experiments and tests, but meanwhile you also need to study. You're too clever not to give a hand, and your own perspective should be extremely valuable once you know what we're talking about. As a starting list, I'd say you need the fundamentals on medicine, physiology, biology, and probably chemistry. Putting together all the things we already know about the human body and its abilities, so that we can start from there."

"However, this is knowledge about the human body." pointed out the boy. "I have a tail, that no one else seems to have. I may have powers that make me... dangerous. On certain circumstances. That points to the possibility of me not being human. That knowledge might not apply."

"Perhaps," said Bulma, "but I would not be so drastic. For someone who is not a human, you look, act, and function an awful lot like a human. You eat, drink, sleep, and, I assume, uh..."
"Excrete." completed the boy.

"...yeah, exactly. You talk and think like a human too. Consider this: if you were not a human, what could you be?"

Goku thought about this for a while. "I could be another animal of some kind. Just very human-like."

"Ok. Or? More hypotheses."

"I could be a human that has changed into something else. Possibly, as the effect of some kind of magic."

"Not bad. Anything else?"

"You said there are other creatures out there, in space. We heard their voices." remembered the boy. "I could be one of them, who happened to end up here."

"Well, let's consider these three then. You're a non-human animal, you're a mutant, you're an alien. Out of these three, two mean that you're still very closely related to a human. Animals are similar to humans, some more than others, and apes are the most similar of all. If you were some other kind of ape, you would have a lot to share with us. As for mutants, magical or not, they would be humans with some extra steps. So, our knowledge would still be relevant. The alien hypothesis is perhaps the most interesting. All the aliens I saw in the afterlife were very non-human in looks, and as you heard, their voices are equally unusual. What do you think would be the likelihood of two species of aliens completely independently getting to the point of looking perfectly alike, except for a tail?"

Goku thought about it a bit. "Not much, I imagine. Unless the gods created us on purpose this way."

"The gods are a possibility I now have to consider," Bulma pouted a bit at this, "and that's bad because they throw a wrench in every reasoning - for every question the answer could always be 'the gods did it' and leave it at that. But if I never even realised they were around, there's a reason, and that's that the world seems to tick perfectly fine without their intervention. So from now on I will operate under an assumption that I will call divine minimalism - the gods, whatever their motives and numbers, mostly do their own business and are content with not intervening, except in extraordinary cases and for unfathomable reasons. Under this logic, I think we can safely say that it's much more likely that you are simply some kind of mutated human, or at least related to us, rather than an alien."

"It could be wrong, though." noted Goku. "This assumption is purely your own idea - in fact, it sounds like it is your own wish."

"It could be wrong, but then, what could possibly be right?" she sighed. "If the gods like to play havoc with the most common rules of logic, we're done for anyway. What usually gets us through day in day out isn't relying on the gods, but figuring stuff out for ourselves and using it to live better. It works, one way or another, so I'm not ready to give it up just yet. Anyway, since we're talking about being human... I have a test we can do immediately to have a better idea of this. Come with me."

They walked out of the heavy equipment lab, and into a smaller one. There were a lot of flasks and cans ordered on shelves, a sink, a fume hood, a glovebox, a microscope and various other chemistry implements.

"This is our preparation lab. Not usually meant for biology, but we have all the basics." Bulma grabbed a sterile syringe and ripped it out of its envelope, then only took its needle. "Would you mind if I just prick your finger?"
In response, Goku extended his hand and index finger, and exposed it to the needle. Bulma tried to sting it multiple times - each time, she would push, and the needle would just bend without penetrating the kid's skin.

"You know what? You do it." she said, handing the needle to Goku. He deftly picked it between thumb and index fingers of the other hand, pushed, and quickly drew a few drops of blood without any fuss.

"How is it that when I do it you... nevermind. Just let the blood fall on this piece of glass, there. Push it well. Okay. Now I will put it inside this microscope - this is a lens that allows you to see stuff magnified to a really amazing level. So you will be able to see how your blood looks like if made one thousand times bigger."

"How should it look like?" inquired Goku. "Like blood, right? It's just... a red liquid."

"Hah! You'll be surprised. Put your eyes here, see..."

Goku put his eyes to the microscope's twin eyepieces. Inside, thousands of red disc-shaped objects floated and stacked themselves on top of each other. They formed columns in various directions counting each dozens of them. Some other things were smaller, other were clearer. At one point, an amorphous blob slid through the spaces between the other things. It stopped one moment, like a hound sniffing the air for prey, then it deformed itself into a nearby opening and kept flowing around, like a living puddle.

"I've got things!" said Goku, alarmed. "In my blood."

"That's normal." Bulma laughed. "I'll tell you more. That's human. Or at least, pretty common for creatures born on this planet."

She leaned on the microscope and looked for herself.

"Yep." she confirmed. "I'm not a doctor but to me that looks like human blood. Well, there's much better exams to try, but this is a beginning."

They walked back to the other laboratory. Bulma started listing a series of books that Goku should check out of the Capsule Corporation library and start reading, covering the various topics he needed some knowledge on. By the time they arrived, she had already assigned him basically two college degrees worth of books. Goku didn't do much beyond nodding at each new title.

"...and that's why I think it would be really useful for you to read Advanced Quantum Field Theory." she concluded.

"I will try to keep up with all this. What is your plan for today, though?"

Bulma walked to one of the machines - a massive hydraulic press.

"We will start with this I think." explained the girl as she patted the metallic cylinders. "I want to get a sense of your strength, first thing. I also have some trigger sensors so we can time your running speed."

She grinned.

"You'll see." she said. "We will get this all sorted out in no time at all!"
And I'm back from my hiatus! Sorry for the wait, but I needed some time to put order in my ideas - hopefully it'll be fruitful. This new arc will be rather lighthearted, and it will take the place of Dragon Ball's original training arc on Muten Roshi’s island. It's also going to be a bit of a challenge because I will try to make Bulma's research as realistic as I could possibly think researching spiritual energy could be, while still keeping the story engaging. I hope you will keep enjoying it!
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the idea and characters of Dragon Ball are owned by Akira Toriyama. This is a simple non-profit fan parody. This chapter is pretty dense in scientific terminology and concepts, so I added a glossary at the end if you need a reference.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter 11 - She trained me with science

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 2

Dear research diary,

I hate you and you're super boring to keep, but I guess I really have no choice here. My plan is full of different things to do and I need to keep them straight somehow, or I will forget half of what I did before the end of this. So, here we go.

The first tests I performed on Goku were just attempts to measure his current abilities. I made him push against the hydraulic press (on second thought, that was really dangerous, as my father pointed out screaming when he passed in front of the lab. Now he sicced Caroline on me to stop me and warn him if I ever do something like that again. He's very particular about lab safety - whenever it's me working in the lab, at least). Anyway, I made Goku run 100 metres with optical sensors on both sides of the lab to measure his times. I measured his top jumping height (turns out, we needed to go outside for that one), how much direct heat he can stand before getting hurt, etc. I also tried to have him be hit by an impact pendulum, but apparently, danger. As if he wouldn't have been totally fine, he got shot by a freakin' sniper rifle and survived! Boo, Caroline. I hate you even though I'm dictating this to you. Let it be known.

The good though rather unsurprising news is, Goku completely shattered every established world record for each of these activities. But it's interesting to set a limit to those skills. The hydraulic press was dangerous because apparently Goku's maximum lifting force is only half of its capacity, more or less. Which means it could in theory squish him if I had set it too high from the beginning. That's pretty weird, I was used to think of him as basically invincible, yet I've always had machines more powerful than him in my basement.

Of course a hydraulic press isn't also in condition to kick your ass with its power while jumping around like crazy, so Goku still wins that particular battle. But it puts his strength in a more concrete perspective. Tomorrow we'll start with more detailed analyses.

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 3
Today I wanted to test Goku's resistance in a more quantitative way. Since delivering force is both imprecise and apparently unsafe, my best idea was to deliver heat. Which means I got Goku to strip down his chest (note: he is ripped) and be hit by a laser beam. It didn't even tickle apparently, at least at low enough power. My idea was that I could then use an infrared camera to record the delivered heat as it dispersed along his skin, and so measure what temperature it reached. If he's so resistant, it seems logical that he must have some way to absorb a lot of incoming energy, and I was wondering if this meant he can just withstand it, or make it outright disappear. So I wanted to measure his skin's heat capacity. The problem is, I don't know his heat transfer coefficients either, which are probably similar to any other human's but that's just a very fuzzy thing to measure, so the equation had multiple variables. My solution was to take multiple points at different power levels of the laser and then fit a model to them. At first it failed consistently, because Goku's Magic Self-defensive Skin (TM) kicked in. He can adjust his thermal properties depending on the amount of incoming damage he receives! How does he do that? So all measurements were nonsense. Then Goku himself suggested the solution. He says he can't control this effect voluntarily, but he proposed that I just try using laser pulses that start very powerful, right at the limit of what he can stand, in order to stimulate his maximum defensive reaction, then go down to the desired intensity. It requires a bit more of fitting per point and all of Goku's ouch-ing attracted my dad to check what the hell were we doing but what do you know, it worked. Now I have a pretty good estimate of Goku's skin maximum heat capacity. Not-so-surprising news: it's higher than any recorded substance or, for what it counts, theoretical upper limits for non-degenerate solid matter. Of course this could also mean simply the heat disappears somewhere never to be seen again, which would invalidate my measurement but has a number of other problems.

How is that not even surprising to me. What have these last weeks done to me.

Tomorrow we'll try to investigate more.

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 5

Finally some progress! We've been trying various ways to better test Goku's uncanny thermal properties. The idea that eventually worked was to have him do the laser thing again, but this time inside a water tank. It was a bit of a long shot because of course the water absorbs a lot of the laser's power, but the idea was that we could measure the change in temperature in water to verify whether the energy was conserved or not, and also measure his buoyancy to verify if his density changes or is abnormal (an absolutely crazy density is really the only non-supernatural explanation I can think of that would justify such a high thermal capacity).

Turns out, we got more than we bargained for. Goku's density is constant, but not only we didn't measure any energy disappearing - energy appeared. The water clearly heated up more than either the laser or Goku's own body heat accounted for. So we're now on a good track. Goku possesses some sort of energy that makes him more resistant, but this energy leaks outside when he uses it. That's something we can work on. We'll start running more spectral analyses start tomorrow to figure out what does this energy look like.

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 11
Took a few days to figure it out, as I needed to rig together some new equipment to measure everything properly, as well as shield the room from external noise to get a cleaner signal. But the answer is pretty clear: yes, when he's defending himself from damage, Goku emits a signal! Even better, it's a faint trace in the electromagnetic spectrum not too far from where the Dragon Balls' own signal lies. Its intensity scales roughly with the intensity of the effort he's sustaining. Does that mean that his power is, literally, magic?

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 12

And now after a whole day of completely pointless tests recording his emission spectrum while he performs a thousand different activities to try and answer that question I realise what I should have done from the get go. Take the spectrum in the same frequency range for both his power pole when it's extending and contracting and his little magic cloud and comparing it to his. Tomorrow.

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 13

Bingo! The power pole and the cloud, too, have a similar signal spectrum. The range of frequencies is similar, it's the shape that is very different for both of them. Goku's is very simple, it goes up, down, then up again but less. Like an uppercase I followed by a lowercase one, Ii. The others are much more complex - the pole for example is something like iiIiIIiI. At this point I'm reasonably sure all these things are related. Remains to be seen how.

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 22

Dear research diary,

I still don't like you but not so much as to leave you alone for ten days straight. Thing is, we've had awfully little progress these days and I've been pretty down. Goku's mostly off studying - he's been really engrossed in all the books I gave him, and keeps reading them while lifting weights or such stuff. The beer? Caroline, please don't tell dad about this one. Yes, I know I'm not supposed to, but what the hell! I died and resurrected once, you're not going to tell me if I'm old enough to drink mildly alcoholic stuff. I know I'm going to Hell anyway.

On to the main topic, tried many things, nothing really works, yadda yadda. Can't figure out if Goku's power is just another kind of magic because I have too little other things to compare it to. Can't figure out what magic comes from. Just sort of running in circles, trying to ask him to do different things to see if the spectrum is different, but it's always the same. Same goes for the stick and the cloud. The Dragon Balls, sadly, I can't even monitor any more. They'll still be off for almost a year. I'm out of ideas and I'm going to drink if I want to, goddamnit!

Caroline, you're not supposed to give me advice while I'm dictating this, it's just not very
professional. Also you're not supposed to encourage me to date my experimental subject who's far too young for me. Almost two years younger! Sorry, not happening.

Guess I could drag him out for one day though. I don't know if he needs the fun, but I sure do. And seeing him squirm around in the city surrounded by stuff he doesn't understand will be hilarious.

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 23

THAT WAS SO MUCH FUN! I'm still laughing my ass off. Just the face he made when he first tasted ice cream. Priceless. Someone also gave us flyers for a wrestling match, now he wants to go see 'this new martial art'. I'm not telling him, he has to find out for himself.

Anyway, this outing also gave me an idea. We passed a Museum of Sports - I did not even know West City had that - and of course he wanted to visit it. So we started wandering around, and Goku got all excited seeing an electrostimulator in a section about technology applied to training. He thought it was a very clever idea, and wanted one. But seeing all those electrodes and the way they were applied I also had a different thought. Maybe Goku's energy emissions aren't evenly spread across his body, and maybe I can record them. I can use metallic sensors applied to various spots of his body for that, I will lose on spectral precision of course but will gain positional information. Which means new insights, possibly. I'm back on track!

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 27

It works! We've finally seen some actual results. Goku's energy activates on demand, moves around his body when and where he needs it, almost instantaneously. I imagine it's a subconscious economization mechanism - he simply spends as little as he needs for the purpose. It's so perfect though I don't think there's a real chance of him being caught off guard by hitting before he can put up his defensive barrier. He can however achieve higher concentrations if he focuses consciously. Right now we're only monitoring with six sensors - arms, legs, and front and back of the torso - but I plan to build more. Or possibly a tomographic scanner to visualise the flow. Now that's an idea!

Anyway, this is the breakthrough Goku was really looking for. With this, he can start training with more awareness of what he's actually doing. He's already trying to control his energy better, move it around where he wants to, and I expect this will get much easier once I improve the equipment.

We've also been discussing of how should this energy be called. He said it already has a name, it's obviously ki, the spiritual energy his grandpa taught him flows in all living things and is key to martial arts. I seriously doubt it's key in most people's martial arts, but it obviously is in Goku's, so I'm rolling with it.

I'm the world's first ki scientist!

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 29
So, today's question has been whether Goku's energy can run out. We know he personally can get exhausted, or too damaged, but there's an interesting fine line there - does that mean his ki runs out, or is that just his body getting tired? Testing this requires him to do something that at the same time uses up his ki, but doesn't strain his body in any way. So we settled on him sitting still, reading, while a laser hits his back constantly at an intensity he can withstand. It should not cause any damage as long as he has ki. He can just wait and even sleep until it starts hurting - when that happens, it means he's running out. Unfortunately, this could take some time, and if he regenerates it fast enough it could actually be impossible to ever reach that point. But we don't have a better method to test this. Let's hope we get some decent results.

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 30

He's still sitting.

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 31

He's still sitting.

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 32

Ok, this is ridiculous and clearly not working. We'll close this page for now and write it up as inconclusive until we figure out a better method.

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 34

Fun interlude in between all the ki stuff. I had ordered a PCR machine because even though I'm not a biologist I understood it's pretty simple to operate, and could help me check if Goku has DNA similar enough to ours. It arrived yesterday. I grabbed a drop of blood from Goku's finger (now that he can control ki better, it means he can let me prick him if he wants to!) and put it inside. Today I have the results and, uh, from what I understand from the manual, yes, Goku's DNA got duplicated. Now I could sequence his genome, if only I had any clue how to do that. I would need to get someone else involved, but at the same time, if his DNA turns out to be not human enough to pass off as normal, what am I going to tell them? That I've been studying a little monkey boy mutant and helping him train in the mystical martial arts?

I need a biologist working for me under a non-disclosure agreement.

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 35
Today I begin work on my idea to build a ki tomographic scanner. The idea is to build a spherical chamber whose walls are covered in sensors, in some multifaceted polyhedral shape. If ki circulates inside the body, then part of its emissions must be re-absorbed by the flesh they pass through. This means that by observing the same section of the body from multiple angles one should be able to compute a full 2D profile of the ki flux across the entire slice. This can be enhanced by separating out the scattered or diffused spectrum that results from successive interactions with matter, and that's more or less even in all directions. Repeat for the entire body, and we have a volumetric 3D rendering of the ki flux, including any circuits, sources and sinks. Goku insists that the sources must be the seven chakras he's heard of from his grandpa. I'm somewhat... sceptic about this. Unless one of the abilities allowed by ki is to sense ki itself, and someone has refined and used this ability to the point of doing the same I plan to do now with technology, or there is some kind of magic device that can absolve the same purpose, I don't see how anyone in the past could possibly have figured something like that out. And seven sounds like too convenient a mystical number.

So I've only bet a slice of cake with him on this. Since he doesn't have money to buy me cake, if I win, he'll give me a piggyback ride on his cloud.

Anyway.

The first step is getting an idea of whether ki emission really is volumetric to begin with. I'm testing this tomorrow.

———

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 36

The experiment was a success! A tiny belt of twelve sensors tied around Goku's forearm did the trick. I had him lift a 200 kg weight with that hand, so that he needed ki to do it, and it would flow alternatively to his biceps and triceps depending on his movement. Sure enough, the ki signal came from different places in the arm, and I could even render a crude animation of the slice, with back and front glowing alternatively.

This is an excellent starting point! Now I only need to have at least a hundred twenty eight sensors built to cover the whole shell; design and build the shell skeleton, and a metallic mesh to provide shielding; design all the electronics and connections to coordinate these sensors; and of course, write the software to make the whole thing work.

Easy peasy. I'll get it done in a week.

———

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 43

I did not get it done in a week.

———

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 50
I did not get it done in two weeks either. On the bright side, now Goku has had time to study some physics and it's enough for him to pester me about how any of the things I'm doing work while still not being enough for him to help.


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Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 52

Shell is done. Sensors are done. Now to assembling them, finishing the software, and tuning all the parameters optimally. I already have the algorithms I used for the prototype armband, this should be ea...

No. I have learned better than saying that. I will not say it.

On to work.

__________

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 53

Why don't you fucking work you fucking piece of fucking shit code that I've been fucking writing for fucking two days now fuck you and you whole fucking language and the fucking compiler too.

__________

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 54

It was a missing sign. It's always a missing sign.

__________

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 58

IT'S DONE! I think it's done...? Yes it is!

Sleep! Showers! Regular meals! Here I co-[LOUD THUD]

[SNORING SOUNDS]

__________

Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program, day 59
...did you start recording, Caroline?

I need to sit down and talk about all of this, even if it's just to myself in the future.

Today a lot happened. I ran an experiment, I discovered some new, rather ground-breaking stuff with Goku's help, I witnessed a moment of pure beauty.

I also almost died.

Now I'm scared and wondering about all of this that I'm doing.

Ok, I'll go in order. Yesterday I completed the scanner I'd been working on for way too long. Just for the record, it came out very nice. It's like a nearly-spherical polihedron with a radius of two metres. It's not four metres tall though, just because the lowest fourth doesn't exist, as the solid is truncated to make for a stable base. The structure is given by a cage that runs through all the edges, and the faces are sensor plates hooked to those edges. From the faces come the cables that rely the signal to the computer that then does the post-processing and builds the 3D image. A few of the faces aren't rigidly connected to the structure like the others, but have hinges and a lock, thus forming an irregular shaped door for someone to enter the scanner. For further details, refer to the schematics contained in documents CCHEP.56 to 64.

For all that I built this thing with basically only Goku as the subject to use it on, I didn't really test it on him during development; I only used dummy models that produced microwaves at roughly the right frequency. Why did I do that? Well, partly because he was very immersed in his training and reading. Partly because whenever I brought him in he wouldn't shut up about trying to understand how every single nut and bolt worked and honestly I could use the quiet, what with me having lived on coffee and curses for the last three weeks. But partly because I just wanted it to be a big reveal. I wanted to see his ki flow in its full glory with the completed instrument, not distorted because I still needed to fix some bug with the alpha version. Not very scientific but there you go.

Okay, so anyway, now I'm just ranting. Today. Yeah.

I called Goku, showed him the apparatus, answered his (many, many) questions about its workings. At least now I don't have to go down to the basic laws of the universe whenever I need to explain him something - he's got the gist of most of the basic things. Told him at some point to just get in the fucking scanner, I think. In my excuse, all that coffee's going to take a long time to fully leave my system. Anyway, he obliged, I booted up the computer, he started punching the air just to enter a bit into exercise mode and let the ki flow better, and what I saw was all I had hoped for, and more. It was like seeing all of the blood vessels of one's body light up at the same time - well, perhaps nerves would be a more accurate metaphor. In fact I wonder if ki doesn't just circulate through the nervous system. At the very least, huge chunks of it seem to run parallel to it. It's unfortunately impossible to check the finer details because the microwaves' own wavelength limits the precision with which their origin can be pinpointed down, but the major features were certainly there. Also, well...

Goku asked me what did I see through the speaker system that communicated with the inside of the scanner.

I told him he'd just won a slice of cake.

The system was programmed to measure ki flow, not just amount - my guess being that as it moved it could induce a slight directional blue shift in its own spectrum, and of course I was right. So when I switched to flow diagram mode I could see that there were a number of spots from which ki flowed out without ever flowing in. Sources. And imagine that, there were six of them, raising from the centre of his tail, then to the root of his spine, then up up to the neck, progressively less and less
bright as they went up. I’d read up about chakras and frankly these definitely looked a lot like them. The top two, the head ones, were missing, but those are supposed to be hard to activate, connected to ‘the third eye’ and various supernatural qualities, so it makes sense they didn’t contribute to generate the kind of energy that goes into something as simple as punching things. Also, there was the one in the tail. It wasn’t as bright as the others - the brightest was the one at the bottom of the spine - but it was there. So I suppose for a human being, or whatever it is that Goku is, with a tail there aren’t just seven chakras: there are eight. So long, mystical number, chakras are just regularly spaced along the central nervous system!

I was there, just admiring this sight that I was most likely the first human to lay eyes on, though still nagged by the question of how could the ancients who drew those chakra diagrams possibly have gotten it right, when Goku started experimenting with the same things he’d learned with the previous sensor system. I didn’t know this, but during his training time in the last weeks he has refined his abilities a lot. Now he could concentrate ki in a single part of his body, then switch to another, all pretty flawlessly and faster than human eye could see. He started moving it around, then complained that it was harder than with the sensors, because he could not see what he was doing. Which gave me an idea. I found a couple very long cables, hooked a second screen into the output and dragged it into the scanner. There was enough room under the door to let the cables pass, and once the screen was laid flat on the floor it didn’t disturb detection much. So Goku now could see his own ki flowing around with never achieved before precision, and he immediately started to make use of it. In five minutes, he had gone from moving it from hand to hand to circulating it through each of his fingers, whose tips lighted up in a cycle like some flashy LED billboard.

At that point, I asked him what would have happened if he tried not just to move the ki inside his body, but if he tried to push it towards the **outside**, instead. I thought maybe he could force it to be compressed against his own body's confines, and push it to even higher densities. I had a video feed from the inside of the scanner, and I saw him make a very intrigued face and stretching his arm forward.

One second later, a bolt of undefined energy blasted away three of the sensor plates of the scanner, melted the steel cage and zipped at exactly twenty centimetres from my head, ionising the air so much my hair raised itself for the static electricity, and finally crashed into the wall on the other side of the laboratory, taking a good chunk of it but luckily not going deep enough to pierce it.

The first instants were just pure panic for me, and without thinking I immediately reacted by going to the wall and hiding the damage with a nearby cart that I moved in front of it. I was terrified because I had almost died, of course, but I was also terrified because I thought my dad would come check what had happened, and if he found out he would just stop my program and not let me do this any more and I already did not want to talk to him about spiritual energies and chakras because that sounded really crazy and also because it was **my** project and I didn't want him to take over even a bit of it from me. During all of this I didn't pay attention to Goku. On second thought, I probably should have, because he didn't have a video feed, and when his screams calling my name didn't receive an answer and he couldn't see me any more from the hole blasted by his shot he simply broke the lock and pushed the door open. He ran to me and looked like he was about to cry. Poor thing must have thought he’d just killed the person who was taking care of him for the second time - I can’t blame him for being a bit out of it. I gave him a hug, and that's how my father found us, which perhaps was all for the better. Thing is, I never really found a reason or the time to clarify any misconceptions my parents might have about my relationship with Goku. So when he saw us huddled together, dad just asked me what happened, took me handwaving it away as a random, totally-not-dangerous short circuit as an answer without thinking too much into it and left, surely not wanting to butt in too much in a private moment.

Then Goku calmed down, and I started freaking out. I realised how close I'd come to losing
everything I was trying to obtain for a completely random occurrence. My dad isn't really wrong about lab safety after all - but how do you plan for safety when you're studying something so completely new?

But it was more than that. I only had a hunch about this - but the power of that blast had been as much, if not more, as Goku's usual punch, and he had been barely trying. I needed to know, so I grabbed him by his arm and dragged him with me to the roof immediately. I told him to do it again - I might have sorta screamed it into his face, in fact - to aim his hands to the sky, focus, and fire as much energy as he could, as fast as he could. Just let loose.

It was glorious and terrifying. A pure beam of raging blue light piercing the sky. I swear, it made a hole in a cloud. A friggin' cloud. It just pierced through it and busted it. I couldn't estimate the energy of it, and it obviously was pretty unwieldy - Goku was unsteady on his feet, pushed by the recoil of all that power - but it must be orders of magnitude stronger than any of his fists. After a few seconds, he fell to his knees, out of breath. Just a few seconds to emit and use up all of his energy, the one we couldn't drain in three days with less extreme methods. How much must that be? Enough to destroy a building? A city? A mountain?

A planet?

Well, not a planet, probably. That's really a lot of energy. But still.

...

Damn, I'm still shaking.

...

Why did I ever think I could have any business mixing up with all this dangerous stuff anyway? What was I thinking?

...

What? No, Caroline, don't tell my dad. I don't care what your protocols are, just don't! He will tell me to stop. And I have no intention to stop. I can do this! I only need to be strong. Stronger. It's my project, and no one would believe me anyway, and if I don't do it no one will, and one day someone will blow up Earth and I will die and go to Hell BECAUSE I CAN'T KEEP MY FUCKING MOUTH SHUT DAMN MY STUPID FUCKING SELF.

...

[SOBBING SOUNDS]

...

I'm serious, Caroline, I'm fine. I didn't mean danger-danger. Don't tell my dad.

Please.

...

Ok, you want to do this, let's do this. You think I can't throw down? I can handle your electronic ass however I want. Didn't want to, but you leave me no choice. Caroline, interrupt all functionality and go into standby now until further instructions, special user permission Bulma Briefs, password-

[RECORDING INTERRUPTED]
Breakfast at the Briefs' house was a rather opulent affair. There was a large table in the living room that Panchy had a habit of covering with a white embroidered tablecloth, and on top of that, with a vast choice of deliciousness. There were cakes and muffins; warm toasted bread, spreadable butter, and a selection of coloured jams and jellies of different colour in glass jars; shortcrust pastries stuffed with cream and croissants; tea, coffee and milk to accompany them; and last but not least, pancakes, piled up on a plate.

This was, of course, rather excessive, but it did not require much work of the housewife. Most of the stuff they would either have ready, or get delivered daily. Some things were prepared automatically by machines. The one thing that was always prepared by hand was the pancakes, which were easy enough for Panchy to make in the space of time between waking up and breakfast, and which she took a special pride in.

Today, the pancakes were slightly burnt.

Dr. Briefs sat at the table without as much as glancing at it, being lost in his reading of a series of papers and reviews on printed loose sheets. He kept holding them in his right hand, and with his left he blindly grasped for something to munch on. Panchy turned on the TV. The news were on, and the anchor was relaying something about an inane sex scandal in which some famous exceptional baseball player had been caught. She sighed - if there was one thing that put everyone in the family in agreement, it was that sports were boring. Well, at least until Bulma had brought home that new boyfriend of hers. Goku was a cute kid, but he was obsessed with his exercise routine.

Dr. Briefs found a pancake with his hand, brought it to his mouth and took a bite. He had to take a second and munch on it before he noticed something was wrong and put down his read.

"Cutie pie," he said, "these pancakes are burnt."

"I know!" answered his wife. "It was the oddest thing. I put them on the fire as usual and then distracted myself a moment and told Caroline to warn me when they were ready to turn. And then, she never did."

The doctor frowned. "That doesn't sound right. Are you sure you used a clear phrasing that she could understand, cutie pie? You know she's not as smart as a person."

"Of course, Honey! Don't be silly. I told her, Caroline, warn me if these pancakes start to burn. But she did not. I thought it was a pity to toss them though. I still made them with love, you know?"

"Well, yes." the man solemnly nodded, then gobbled down the rest of the pancake, with a less-than-ecstatic expression.

"Caroline," he asked, finally, "can you tell me why didn't you warn my wife the pancakes were burning?"

No answer came.

"Huh. That's odd."

"Didn't I tell you, honey?"
It was at that point that Goku walked into the room. He was still rubbing his eyes from recent sleep, and before managing to speak he made a big yawn.

"Good morning, Goku!" chirped Panchy.

"Good morning, madam." answered the boy, very politely. "I was wondering if Bulma was here. She did not tell me anything yesterday about having the day for myself, and usually when she doesn't we're supposed to do experiments."

"Ah, yes, your little secret research program!" Dr. Briefs laughed. "One day you will have to tell me what is it that you do all day with all those machines. Sorry, Goku, we did not see her either. Maybe she's still sleeping. I would ask Caroline, but apparently, she's not working."

"We'll wait for her. Have something in the meanwhile, Goku!" said Panchy.

"Oh, thanks, madam, but I do not want to impose."

"Oh, nonsense! Look how much stuff we have. And you've been here for two months already. Our daughter's guests are ours!"

"And quite literally at that," chimed in Dr. Briefs, "since he's been living in the house's north wing all this time."

Goku nodded and came closer to the table. He started gazing over all the goodness there, hovering his hand, without ever seeming to either settle for anything nor wanting to just give up for fear of offending his host.

"Have one of those," chimed in Panchy, pointing at a bunch of muffins darker than the rest, "they're made with the flour of a special cereal and vegetable oils. Low in fat and high in protein!"

"Oh! In that case..." Goku's eyes shined, and he took one of the muffins and stuffed his mouth with it in two bites.

"I ordered them specifically for you. How well do I know you!" laughed Panchy.

The doorbell rang.

"Caroline, could you please... oh, right, dang." Dr. Briefs got up and walked to the door. "One moment!"

Five minutes later, he returned, with a puzzled expression.

"Well, I'll be damned if I understand this. Apparently, we got fined for unauthorised fireworks displays. The cop was very polite, but he says all of our neighbours saw a blue bolt of light rise from our terrace yesterday evening, around 10 PM. I have no idea what that was about. I was downstairs in my lab at that time."

"And I was out at the club." said Panchy. "With a magnificent hand at bridge, if I may add."

They both turned around to look at Goku.

On TV, a journalist was interviewing a meteorologist about the mysterious phenomenon witnessed by many the night before in West City, of a cloud with an almost perfectly round, expanding hole in it.

"Uhm." said Goku. "We should go look for Bulma."
Knock, knock, knock.

"Bulma, will you please open the door?" pleaded Dr. Briefs.

"Noooooo...!" came a whining voice from inside the room.

"Why are you acting like this, sweetheart?" asked Panchy. "We're not angry for the fireworks, I promise! The fine costed only as much as today's breakfast! We're just worried for you, us and your boyfriend..."

"HE’S! NOT! MY! BOYFRIEND!" screeched the voice.

"Bulma, did you put Caroline in standby? I can't unlock her with my credentials." intervened her father. "This is important. I need her for my work. And you mother burned her pancakes because of this."

Silence.

"You should not have an admin password. Did you crack her system too?"

More silence.

"Mister, if you don't mind, maybe I can convince her." intervened Goku. Then, turning to the room, "Bulma! Please open the door and let's talk."

Still some silence, then "I don't want to!" was the answer.

"We should take a decision." he continued, serious. "I understand that you would like to keep all of this for yourself, but I don't think we can hide it any longer."

Panchy was all ears.

"Goku, what are you talking about?" hissed Bulma. "We aren't hiding anything! Not a thing! At all!"

"Right, what are you talking about?" asked Dr. Briefs. "Boy, you should tell me exactly what..."

"I don't feel like I should talk about it without her consent." said Goku, serious. "But I also think it's really important that you should know. It's been two months already and it couldn't be kept from you for much longer anyway."

"Bulma, what did I tell you about being careful?" chimed in Panchy, unable to hold back any more.

The inhuman scream that was heard afterwards seemed to undergo an audible Doppler shift up and down - as Bulma in order opened the door, burst out of the room, grabbed Goku, dragged him inside, and locked again the door behind her, all before her parents could do anything but stare flabbergasted at her sortie.

Goku found himself inside the familiar setting of Bulma's room. Compared to the first time he had seen it though - when it had been unused for weeks and kept clean by her mother - now it was much more lived in. Which in this case translated to 'a complete mess'. The girl let him go and tossed herself on the bed, amidst crumpled and dirty clothes.

"If I let you run off your mouth any more, my mother will start buying milk bottles and nappies." grumbled Bulma. "Good job there. Now I don't really have any way out."
Goku sat on the bed next to her. "What happened yesterday evening? You seemed upset, but..."

"I screwed up," groaned the other. "Caroline said she would report to my father that we had been engaging in dangerous activities. She wasn't smart enough to figure out what had happened on the lab by herself, but once I made the stupid mistake of recounting it for my research diary, she got the gist of it. I panicked, didn't want her to report to my father, with the risk of him butting in and stopping the project, and..."

"You shut her down."

"Yeah. Put her into standby. I had managed to sneak another password in her system - thought I might need it for times like this. But still wasn't the most clever idea."

"Bulma, they saw us. The entire city. I don't think this could be kept much of a secret any more anyway. And you'll have to put Caroline back online at some point, and unless you can erase her memory..."

"I can't. I don't have that level of access to her system. All I did was gain some time." Bulma sighed and covered her face with her hands. "I told you, didn't I? I screwed up."

"I don't really get why can't you just go and involve your father. He seems a capable scientist. And the last few physics book I read had entire sections on capsule statics and dynamics where his name was mentioned every other page. Makes it look like he's the kind of person you would want to help."

"That's exactly it!" exclaimed Bulma. "He's just such a big shot already. He's got capsules to work with. I deserve my own field, so that I can give names to formulas, laws and theorems too, you know."

"Bulma, I think you're both under and overestimating yourself."

The girl threw him a suspicious glance. The line between compliment and insult could be very thin when he was involved. "How so?"

"Underestimating, because you've already done a lot. Having read up all about those old scientists, I still don't think I can remember one who happened to make this much progress on a new topic in so little time. Yes, this is still a bit what you would call low hanging fruit, but it is impressive anyway. I doubt your father will not let you have the honour of this one. He does not seem the type to hog glory anyway."

"That's true, but what would you know about it?"

"For example, in History of modern physics, it mentions how he let Prof. Socks take credit for his independent discoveries about the fluctuations of the excited capsule field, despite in theory having an excellent former claim to them. And when the Pelbeian Prize of year 733 was assigned, he..."

"I get it." Bulma waved a hand dismissively. "Go ahead. How am I overestimating myself, instead?"

"Well." Goku twirled his thumbs, slightly embarrassed. "In a number of ways. But the most important is, there is a constant through the stories of all these scientists I read about."

"And that is?"

"That no one of them worked alone. Not even your father. It always took time and help to get where they wanted, even when they still were the main creative force behind their research."
"I'm not working alone. I'm working with you."

"I'm your test subject!" protested the boy. "I'm studying but I'm barely catching up. I can not really keep up with you at your own level yet. You need the help of other actual scientists."

"But I will get it! As soon as I can I will get the money to hire someone else and..."

"Bulma," Goku looked at her, deadly serious, "I don't think that can happen if your father does not understand how important your work is. And that can not happen if you don't tell him. You said you wanted to defend the Earth, to defeat death and avoid Hell. Those are very ambitious objectives. If you are serious about achieving them, you should not be too proud as well. You can't be too careful; when fighting an uphill battle, you want all possible advantages. Like my grandfather said, never think about all the ways in which you can kill an enemy; always think about all the ways they can kill you."

"And who's the enemy in this metaphor?"


Bulma thought about it for a while. She groaned. She sighed. She rolled back and forth a bit in her bed. Finally, she said "Fine!", jumped up, walked to the door, and pushed the handle.

Her parents, still waiting outside, looked at her expecting an explanation. A very good explanation.

"Mom, and especially dad," started Bulma, "I have a few things to explain you about what I've been doing these last two months..."

One hour later, everyone was sitting in the living room. Dr. Briefs was reading a bundle of freshly printed paper, occasionally mumbling something unintelligible, licking his thumb and browsing through the thick dossier. Goku and Bulma were sitting on a couch in front of him, the latter tapping her foot nervously. Panchy was standing, pacing back and forth, energised, or shocked.

"I still can't believe that he's not actually your boyfriend!" she blurted out.

Bulma rolled her eyes. "Oh, yeah. Because I only told you every single time since the first moment you two met."

"You also told me the opposite! And you also told me you died!"

"And that was true." pointed out the girl.

"I know! But I thought you were joking, how could I have possibly imagined that...?"

"I am alive now. What does it matter?"

"But it matters!" now the woman was on the verge of tears. "Silly Bulma, it matters! I would have been very sad if you... if you..."

The girl shifted uncomfortably around. She didn't say anything, but she moved a bit aside on the couch, leaving room for one more. Her mother came to sit next to her, and she awkwardly put an arm around her shoulders. They stayed that way, half-hugging, for a while, until Dr. Briefs finally turned the last page, put the stack of paper down on the table, and spoke his verdict.

"You've been pretty good." he said.
Goku and Bulma both sighed in relief.

"I can hardly believe all this story of yours," continued the man, "but I cannot think you would forge something like this just for the sake of a joke, and you seem to take it very seriously. While at the moment I would say *that* is enough evidence to convince me that you're telling the truth," and he threw a glance at a steel jug that had been crumpled into a ball of metal by a small but powerful fist, "Goku, I look forward to you demonstrating to me all your abilities."

"Sure, Mister." said the boy. "It's not a problem at all."

"Well, well. That will be interesting. So, your research. I think this is a pretty great starting point, and I agree that if it's all true, this seems very important. Of *paramount* importance, in fact. I wonder if you, being so inexperienced, even if capable, can..."

"Dad." said Bulma, loudly.

"Right, right. Finders keepers, sweetie, like when you were a child and would bring home some dirty old machinery you went and dug out of the junkyard..."

"DAD."

"Yes, right. Where was I? Oh, yes. Very important. Capsule Corporation does not deal with weaponry or military applications, but this stuff, oh boy. We will have a lot on our hands."

"These are not weapons." pointed out Goku. "It is about cultivating the human body."

"My boy, when the human body becomes able to punch through the armour of a tank, you will find out the difference becomes very thin. I don't think we could easily keep this a secret, not if we also want to test and advance as thoroughly as possible. And if one day it will really be necessary to protect ourselves from alien threats, we can't just hope to do it alone. We will need to disclose enough to prepare suitable defences. Plus, as this little family crisis shows us all too well, it is not easy to keep it all under wraps for long. But for a while we shouldn't attract much attention, so we will think about it later."

"What do you suggest we do from now on then?" asked Bulma.

"First thing, we need more test subjects."

Bulma blinked.

"But, who else would be that?" she asked. "It's not like I can just put an ad on a sports magazine to hire more ki users for my research program."

"I think in fact you should do just that." said the doctor, smiling. "Like, this Ox fellow you mentioned, he sounded like he too was pretty strong."

"He's right." intervened Goku. "My grandpa too used to be stronger than me. Ki is not unique to me. Neither is magic unique to the few items we know of, probably."

"But why wouldn't we know about such people? And why would they accept to do this of all things?"

"In every story I've ever read, martial artists tend to be pretty reserved about their abilities, especially the ones who supposedly wielded special powers." explained the kid. "I suppose it's a habit that makes sense - if your opponent does not know your skills, you can surprise them. Wisdom says, you
don't show off; you use your power when the situation demands it. But if one of them was in this city, they could need help to survive, and finding a way to put their skills to use for that in private would probably be good for them. They wouldn't have many chances to do that, given that you people don't appreciate what real martial arts are around here."

Bulma looked at him teasingly. "Wait, are you still bitter about that wrestling match...?"

"It was a travesty." scoffed Goku. "That was disrespectful to both the public and the noble tradition of true martial arts."

While Bulma was still laughing, Dr. Briefs took the floor again.

"So, I think we agree that we need to hire more subjects. A sample of one does not make for good science. I will supervise and advise you, but the project for now remains firmly in your hands, Bulma. We will also need facilities. A gym for Goku, perhaps? I think we can arrange for something. And an indoor test range for his most... spectacular abilities."

"Also a biologist." chimed in Bulma. "In fact, let me hire at least three doctoral students."

"Bulma..." Dr. Briefs shook his finger. "You're still in high school. Don't get ahead of yourself. Let's make it one."

"Two."

Her father sighed. "Deal. But only after you have consolidated your results with the new test subjects."

"And about school, since you mentioned it, and it will begin again in a few days. You don't really think that the head of such an important research project should really go and spend five hours every day in a classroom..."

"You can not drop out. That's not an option." grumbled the doctor.

"Not dropping out! But I can be home schooled. I checked. I can just take the exam at the end."

"So you would want me to hire a tutor...?"

"Caroline can be my tutor! She's a literal talking encyclopedia! And you know I can do it on my own. Do you really think me going to school is more important than all this? When I know most of that stuff already anyway?"

Dr. Briefs hesitated a bit, looked to his wife for approval, but she was still hugging Bulma and she just looked like she'd agree to pretty much anything that would please her little girl in that moment anyway.

"Fine," he concluded, "we can do that. But you need to pass the exam with top grades, you hear me? Top."

"Yay!" Bulma jumped up in excitement, leaving her mother to suddenly tumble on the couch. "Don't worry, dad, I won't disappoint you. Goku, come, we have work to do! Today I was thinking we should..."

They walked downstairs, and soon their voices disappeared, muffled by both distance and the underground laboratory's sound insulation. The doctor got to sit on the couch next to his wife.
"I still think they're cute together." said Panchy.

"She grew up so fast." sighed Dr. Briefs.

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**Glossary of scientific and engineering terminology**

*Heat capacity*: one of the key thermal properties of a body. Represents how much energy is required to heat up a cubic meter of it by one degree of temperature. Since the energy is stored in approximately equal part in each atom, materials with a higher density will usually have a higher heat capacity too (due to having more atoms per cubic meter). It also changes with temperature.

*Heat transfer coefficient*: another important number for thermal properties. It's a quantity that defines how fast heat flows from one object to another (or in general its surroundings) given a certain difference in temperature. For contact with air or water it can be further split in conduction and convection coefficients, which are the two mechanisms through which the transfer effectively happens.

*Impact pendulum*: a tool used in materials science and engineering to test the durability of materials. It's exactly what it says on the tin: a huge pendulum that swings and hits the block to test like a hammer. It's usually employed to hit small chunks of material (metal or plastic) that are already notched in order to measure how much energy is necessary to break them altogether.

*PCR*: stands for "Polymerase chain reaction". It's a method used to copy and multiply fragments of DNA. Since it uses the enzyme DNA polymerase, that is found in human cells, it obviously could not possibly work on DNA that's completely alien (assuming aliens even have DNA).

*Spectrum*: a graph representing the intensities of the various frequencies that make up a signal, usually as a line that goes up and down forming peaks and valleys. A very common example could be the shape a music visualiser shows in time, with columns representing the bass or treble notes. In this chapter it always refers to a spectrum of electromagnetic frequencies (like radio waves, microwaves, light etc.).

*Tomographic scanner*: a type of device used, especially in medicine, to create a 3D image of a body. Commonly used types are the CT scan (Computed Tomography scan, that uses X-rays) and PET scan (Positron Emission Tomography scan, using positrons that emit gamma rays once inside the body). Since the ki scanner seen here is based on detecting internal emissions, it is more similar to the latter, but it would also have generally worse resolution because it uses microwaves.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Ok, this chapter was a bit of a pain to write, which is why it took so long. I went through a lot of different ways of trying to tell the same story without coming off as tedious or too technical, so I hope I finally hit the sweet spot! A big thanks also to Caliburn0, who is now my official beta reader. He's helped me iron out some of the wrinkles in this chapter and hopefully will keep helping me with the future ones, so that the quality will improve!
Job security, chuunibyou and other delusions

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the idea and characters of Dragon Ball are owned by Akira Toriyama. This is a simple non-profit fan parody.

Chapter 12 - Job security, chuunibyou and other delusions

The room was hot, dark, and did not smell too good. The smell was mostly caused by the lack of air circulation coupled with the sweaty, unwashed clothes dropped on bed, chair and floor alike, not to mention the abandoned empty cups of ramen noodles. Lying on the bed, Yamcha wondered at what time exactly it all went so wrong.

He had at least a dozen candidates for consideration.

A light, rhythmic tapping sound came from the door. Like a very tiny hand hitting it with a secret knock.

"Open up." moaned Yamcha, shifting slightly amidst the sheets. "It's unlocked."

The door creaked open, and Puar entered, floating, a shopping bag in his hand. The bag must have been quite heavy, because his hovering was quite uncertain, and he occasionally relented and fell a dozen centimetres, then slowly recovered his flying height.

"How are you feeling, Yamcha?" asked the cat. "Any better?"

"No. What did you buy?"

"Some more ramen noodles - I found the spicy chicken ones, just as you like them! Then there's some bottles of beer, your favourite body building magazines, some fresh food, you know, fruit and vegetables..."

"You can have those." groaned the boy.

"...well, I thought it would do you some good to... nevermind. Then I wanted to get you something to cheer you up, and..."

With a slightly trembling hand and a smile, Puar handed her present to Yamcha. It was a baseball. Autographed by him.

"This is a limited edition from that special event when I met the fans. Where did you get this?" inquired Yamcha, weighing and twiddling the ball in his hand. "I hope you didn't spend too much money for it. You know we're barely getting by."
"It was at the grocery store." admitted Puar. "In a bargain bin."

"Fantastic. This really cheers me up."

He casually tossed the ball aside. It zipped through the air and jammed itself in the wall the opposite side of the room.

"You know," said Yamcha, "I was thinking maybe I should try and go out. I don't want to, but I need the air. I feel like I'm losing my shape."

"It won't come out." announced Puar, trying to retrieve the ball stuck five centimetres deep in plasterboard.

"And it's time that I tried making my grand return. Yamcha's greatness can't be limited by these four walls any more," he continued, not sounding very convinced. "I guess."

"That is nice and all," said the cat, leaving the wall to come float over his shoulder, "but what if you were recognised? What if someone started bullying you? What if a mob gathered to lynch you? It could happen. They hate you. They all hate you."

His cat eyes shone bright, alone, in the penumbra of the room.

"Only I love you." he whispered.

"I know, Puar." replied Yamcha. "You're a very good friend."

The cat tilted his head a bit. "Yes, I am." he said.

"And you're probably right. I could handle any of those buffoons if they tried to hurt me, but I couldn't take the humiliation. Perhaps I should just let the whole thing blow off. People forget about this stuff. But we're also running out of money."

"Don't worry, Yamcha. I can make money if necessary."

"Guess so. Can you pass me those magazines you bought?"

The room fell in silence, as Puar arranged the items he had bought on the shelves and Yamcha flipped lazily through the pages of Man Up Now. He was about to put it down when he suddenly did a double take and started re-reading one of the last pages.

"Puar, listen to this," he said. "Do you practice martial arts? Do you believe your strength may exceed what physical limits would normally allow? Do you possess any unusual or supernatural abilities? If your answer to these questions is 'yes', then the Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program is looking for you! Headed by Bulma Briefs, daughter of the celebrated Dr. Briefs who established capsule science, the CCHEP aims at pushing our knowledge of the human body beyond all known limits. Be a part of the next scientific revolution, and redefine what peak performance looks like! This is a full time engagement. Reasonable pay, expenses, and room and board provided."

"Sounds like they're looking for lab rats," commented Puar.

"Don't be so negative. They're looking for special people. Like me! This is a great chance, Puar. I can re-establish my position, show everyone back in the League! And make some money in the meantime."
"Do you think they will accept you? They know who you are."

"You're worrying too much, Puar!" laughed Yamcha. "They're scientists, which means they're nerds. They don't care about sports and related news. I'm sure they will have never even heard of me."

Puar's voice got thinner. "I don't like this."

"I'm telling you, you're just overthinking it... I wonder if there's any info on this Bulma person..."

Yamcha grabbed a few past issues of magazines from a pile next to his bed. He remembered that a few months ago, Gym Junkies had ran a series of articles about useful tech for training at any time, and capsules were a big part of it. When he found it, there was a family photo of the whole Briefs household accompanying a cover story about Capsule Corporation. And upon seeing the picture, Yamcha said something that he would have never said just a few months before, proving how much city life and success could change a person.

"She's hot!" he exclaimed. "We're going."

The last three months had been so eventful for Yamcha that he had grown convinced that if his life was a novel, he was sure to be the protagonist. Problem was, he was not quite sure what the genre was supposed to be.

At first, it looked like a sports story. The boy from a seedy background had shown up in the city - not a dime in his pocket, only a flying magic cat for a companion and a lot of big dreams. He had joined a small time team, but as luck would have it, he had made the news as a curiosity when one of his home runs left the stadium entirely and crashed a window at the 50th floor of a nearby skyscraper. During his next match, multiple talent scouts were among the public, and almost immediately snatched him after the game. One wad of bills fanned under his nose later, and Yamcha was the designated hitter of the West City Dinos. His first appearance marked a spectacular victory for the team, with him personally scoring a home run first thing every single time he was at the box. His fame was explosive and instantaneous. Before he got to even play the next match, he had been already featured on the cover of multiple magazines and had become the public's darling.

That's when it all turned into a romantic comedy. Not too suprisingly, Yamcha's combination of sports successes and roguish good looks made him a fan favourite among the female crowd. Which led him to an interesting discovery: his severe anxiety problems when faced with a girl quickly became a non issue when said girl already thought he must be amazing by default and was all over him. All he needed to do was merely avoid embarrassing himself in some really stupid way, and the rest would work itself out just fine. He still managed to screw it up the first times, but soon he got the hang of it. One month in, he had a girlfriend. Two months in, he had more than one at the same time. Two and a half months in, his shyness was but a fading memory of the past, and he had grown confident enough to believe no conquest was off-limits for his irresistible charm.

And then it all crashed down and became a drama.

One day, the president of the West City Dinos received an anonymous call - from a probably disguised voice that he described as sounding "like a child's" - telling him to go back home, because someone had broken in. Deadly worried, since his daughter was supposed to be alone at home, he raced back and ran inside. There he found his best batter touching third base, and not in a baseball match.

The scandal was immense. Since the president's daughter was a minor, in order to avoid being
arrested, Yamcha had to prove that he, himself, was only seventeen. Problem was, in order to be contracted in the league, he had lied about his age. In one strike, Yamcha both avoided jail and was summarily fired. When the storm died down, he was disgraced and humiliated. The League had even agreed on a universal ban for him. One of the unspoken reasons for this was, of course, that the teams had realised the championship had become far too boring after someone who could win any game without fail had joined the fray. Once the novelty of it had worn off, the sponsors had slowly come around to the realisation that this was actually terrible for their business.

And so Yamcha had found himself penniless, jobless, fallen from grace, and forced to hole up in a cheap rented apartment in the hopes that the outside world would as soon as possible find some other thing to be outraged about, and forget all about him.

So, walking in the lobby of the main Capsule Corporation research centre for his job interview, amidst giant holographic screens illustrating the incredible new technology that was being worked on by scientists inside that very building and blinking models of equipment whose purpose he couldn't even begin to understand, it was not hard to imagine that the next chapter of his life would have a science fiction twist.

"...how dare you insult the best pupil of the Ancient School of Vega! You will hear from us again!"

The hulking man violently shut the door behind him, taking care to make a great show of his absolute indignation. A dozen pairs of eyes, belonging to some of the other hopefuls sitting in the waiting room, raised to meet his glance - some more directly, others sneakily, from up a magazine they were reading or under the brim of a hat. A few completely ignored him.

Yamcha tried to give the impression that he was doing the same.

"What happened? Did they reject you?" asked one of the others.

"This is a travesty!" roared the man. "I was judged by this woman who obviously gets nothing about martial arts. She simply had me punch some machine with some phony scientific apparatus. Said I was too weak - me! - and I rated only 0.02 Gokus. What the hell is a Goku, anyway?"

There was some murmuring around the room. The muscly guy left, indignant, and invited anyone who was a serious martial artists and did not want to be a disgrace to their dojo to leave us well. This, it was agreed, was a very wise stance. Which made it all the more surprising that, once he left, everyone went back to their seats and kept waiting, chatting among themselves about how much could a Goku be. They seemed to agree that it probably wasn't much.

Next to Yamcha was sitting a group of four that stood out even among this bunch of often rather eccentric-looking martial artists and athletes. Four figures completely covered, head to toe, in long hooded cloaks that hid them from sight entirely. And the one sitting closest to Yamcha was now chuckling softly. He had a chilling, grating voice.

"These chumps don't get it," he said, "they don't have a chance. What the Program people are looking for is something special. And they sure don't have it."

"Uhm, yeah. But we do, right?" Yamcha wasn't in the habit of chatting up scary cloaked strangers that sounded like they'd risen from a grave rather than a bed. He didn't feel like it could really do him any good.

"Well, we sure do. Am I right, friends?"
All four the hooded guys variously nodded and laughed approvingly.

"As for you... we shall see, I guess. But your little friend there sure looks like they may have seen something of the true face of the world."

Puar, who until now had been perched upon Yamcha's shoulder, floated right in front of the stranger's face. "Please leave Yamcha alone," he hissed, softly.

"To concentrate!" intervened the boy, hurriedly. "I need to concentrate before the interview. I mean, I'm sure I could pass with one hand tied behind my back, but I wouldn't want to show anything less than the best that I can do."

The hooded figure had a hysterical fit of laughter. "You're confident. Good! Maybe you really are special. This could be your door to a new reality."

"Mr. See-Through is invited to the interview." suddenly said a speaker, somewhere on the ceiling. "Can Mr. See-Through please come forward and enter the office."

"Brothers, it is my moment." said another of the hooded figures, with a deep, raspy voice.

"Show them all the secret truth of this world." whispered the one next to Yamcha.

The other nodded and slowly got up from their chair. Then, with a theatrical gesture, under the eyes of Yamcha and all the other applicants sitting around, they grabbed the folds of their cloak, violently pulled it away and let it fall to the ground - revealing that it had been empty all along. A few people gasped. One, very discreetly, walked out of the room not to be seen again. One second later, the door to the office opened and closed seemingly on its own.

Yamcha blinked a couple of times.

"What the hell was that?" he asked, pointing alternatively at the cloak, the door, and the empty air in between.

"That," said the stranger next to him, "was your first glimpse into the great unknown."

The office was really one of the underground labs, repurposed for the occasion. A small corner had a desk, chairs, a water cooler and other conveniences arranged together and separated from the rest by a screen. The rest of the office had machinery of various sorts, including a stripped down version of the ki scanner to which a machine with a cushion designed to measure the strength of punches thrown at it had been added. With the full help - technical and financial - of Dr. Briefs, these modifications had been a matter of a few days.

While waiting for the next applicant, Bulma re-read her notes about the previous one. Not that there was much to write down - everyone up until now had been completely unremarkable. Mostly regular jocks, some with some real talent probably by human standards, but not quite what she was looking for. She slumped back in the chair and adjusted her glasses. They weren't prescription glasses, she didn't need them; she just thought they made her look older and more professional.

The next applicant was not here yet.

She pushed a button next to a microphone on her desk. "Mr. See-Through," she repeated, "can you please come forward and..."
"I am already here." said a coarse voice. It had clearly come from inside the room, and yet, no one was in the room.

Mr. See-Through, what a stupid name, had thought Bulma. Maybe not that stupid, though, she realised now.

"Well, would you like then to come forward," she said, loudly, unsure what part of the empty space in front of her to address, "and show yourself?"

No answer. Sound of steps. An irregular, panting breath.

She slowly slid her hand under the desk, where she had stashed a few self-defense weapons, just in case some kind of weirdo showed up to her interview. This really looked like the right time had come.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Who knows." came the voice. It was too low to be natural - whoever was talking was trying to dissimulate it, or perhaps sound scarier. "I am not of this world. I am a shadow that walks among the living, an emptiness among humanity. No one can track me. No one can see me coming. Maybe I am here."

More steps, quick.

"Maybe there."

Steps again. Panting. Close, this time.

"Maybe right next to..."

The pepper spray must have hit him in full face, because his scream immediately rose a couple of octaves over his previous pitch. In fact, it had been so precise it was now possible to see his traits here and there thanks to a fine mist of red that had covered them all.

"Maybe you shouldn't talk and make noise when trying to sneak on someone." said Bulma, coldly. "Now you have five minutes to convince me of why I should hire you and three to convince me not to call the police."

"I'm sowwy!," cried the voice, that had miraculously gone back to a way more normal human tone, and was now broken by sneezing and coughing, "I wanted to impress you, to make sure you would take me..."

"Well, I am not impressed. I'm looking for people with talents to study, not circus performers."

"Yes, ma'am. Sorry, ma'am."

"Let's start again. What is your name?"

"May I first... err..."

Bulma thought about it for a second and nodded. "Sure. The toilet is that way."

"Thanks!"

There was a distinct sound of running across the room, then the sound of copious amounts of water being poured from the tap came from the washroom as the applicant washed his face. Finally, calmer
and coughing less than before, he came back to sit in front of Bulma.

"I am See-Through the Invisible Man." said the air in front of her desk, still wheezing a bit.

"I meant your real... ah, nevermind. What is it that you can do?"

"Well, I can fight a little. And I am invisible."

"Can you turn visible again?"

"I've never managed it, no."

That's harsh, thought Bulma. No surprise he was a little out of it.

"I'm... sorry to hear that. But it's certainly an interesting ability. Do you know if it's magical in nature? Is it learned or innate?"

The other thought a bit about it. "I don't know really. I just woke up one day when I was eight years old, and I was invisible."

"I'll write it down as acquired for unknown causes then. Do you have any other abilities? Can you turn objects that you touch invisible too?"

"Oh, no, ma'am."

"Wait a second." Bulma squinted. "Are you naked?"

There was a moment of awkward silence.

"...I wanted to impress you." repeated the voice.

"OH FOR GOODNESS' SAKE!"

"...for you see, our previous employer did not fully appreciate the extent of our arcane powers. She did not reward them as handsomely as they deserved."

Yamcha nodded automatically at this point as the stranger next to him kept talking, and talking, and talking. For a shadowy figure with a cloak hiding his face, he was remarkably chatty.

"The old hag would make us fight in order and pay us for every warrior we defeated." grumbled another of the cloaked figures, by far the tallest and most massive of all. "But almost no one would ever make it to me. Most would just run in fear after the first fights. We got a shit deal."

"And so, here we are," concluded the other.

The door that connected the waiting room to the office swung open on its own again, and excited steps ran towards them.

"Brothers," said See-Through, "I have been chosen!"

"Oh, joyous day! That us children of the night may be acknowledged by the world! What did she ask you?"

"Just some details about my invisibility. Then she had me punch a machine to measure my strength."
Said I scored 0.05 Gokus. Do you guys know what's a Goku?"

Three hooded heads, and Yamcha's, shook in unison.

"Well, anyway, she said my strength was barely enough to be interesting, but my powers more than made up for it."

"Mr. Fangs!" announced the usual speaker. "Can Mr. Fangs please come to the office."

"Oh, it's my turn!"

The only one of the group of hooded people who hadn't spoken yet got up and, in a theatrical swirl, tossed aside his cloak, covering another applicant's head in the process. Ignoring the protests, Fangs posed and flexed, showing off his muscles. Or rather, his lack of them. He looked like a slim, frail man with a sickly complexion wearing boxing gloves. His lips were somewhat retracted and his teeth pointy and pearly white.

"Fangs goes to the battle!" he announced, proudly. "Fear my unlimited power!"

"So, you're a vampire."

"Yes."

"Why are you out in the light of day?"

"Oh, it doesn't bother me."

"Are you undead? Did you die and were reborn as a vampire?"

"I just woke up like this one day."

"Can you turn someone else into a vampire by biting them?"

"No."

"Do you need to suck blood to live?"

"Ugh, no! I tried, it tastes terrible."

"Can you survive any wound except for a wooden stake through your heart?"

"I don't think so."

"Do you reflect in mirrors?"

"Yes, I can do that!"

"Vampires shouldn't."

"Oh."

"Do you strongly dislike garlic?"

"Sure. Garlic is yucky."
Bulma sighed and adjusted her glasses with a very judgemental gesture.

"Mr. Fangs," she said, "at the moment it looks like all you have is a magically-induced case of food intolerance, at best. If you are a vampire, what can you do?"

The thin man got up and lifted his gloved fists to the ceiling. Then he emitted a fierce scream, with that squeaky, unpleasant voice of his, and disappeared in a puff of smoke. When the smoke rarefied, in his place was a small bluish bat, furiously flapping its wings to stay afloat.

One moment and one puff of smoke later, the bat returned to be a very skinny boxer.

"Well, that is moderately impressive," commented Bulma. "Reminds me of a pig I've met once. Now, if you would like to take place inside that machine..."

Picking up the newspaper from the magazine table and opening it up in front of him, Yamcha had found out, was a good way to give to the hooded guy the impression that he was really busy doing something else, which had shut him up. Now, however, there still was the issue of killing time until he was called to the interview, so he thought he might as well try to read it.

**PIG IN THE BRIG! Serial molester condemned to ten years of jail sent to West City penitentiary.**

Yamcha quickly browsed through the article trying to make sense of the title, but it was hard to get any meaningful information among all the sensationalistic drivel. There was a picture of a handcuffed small anthropomorphic pig in a striped jail uniform being led by cops into a police van. The caption read, *Not going to pork anyone anymore, will ya?*

"I know this guy!" said Puar, suddenly.

Yamcha looked up to his right, where the cat was hovering. "You know the pig sexual maniac?"

"Sure. We had school together, near the place where I first met you. He learned to transform too - but he has always been an idiot and could not hold up for more than five minutes."

"Huh. It's a small world, isn't it?"

Fangs came out of the office. He raised a fist in sign of victory and was greeted with cheers and a rapid fire of questions from his three friends.

"I scored 0.07 Gokus." he was explaining a few minutes afterwards. "She says she got me mostly for my transformation power though. She really hopes to see someone strong now."

"Well, then it's my turn." said the biggest guy in the group, getting up.

Almost on cue, the speaker announced that Mr. Bandages was now requested in the office. The man removed his cloak like his companions had, and revealed a massive hulking body entirely wrapped in, well, bandages. Yamcha couldn't help but notice that these guys' naming scheme really wasn't that original.

The mummy - hard to call him anything else - walked into the office, having to even bow a little to pass under the door. Yamcha was beginning to think now - how many openings were there? These guys all looked competent and threatening as Hell.

"Don't worry," said Puar, as if he could read his thoughts, "you will get hired. You're way better
than these circus freaks."

"I don't know, man," he tossed aside the newspaper for good. "These guys all have something special. What do I have?"

The little cat's inscrutable eyes fixated on his.

"You're Yamcha," he said, "and that's enough."

After the invisible man and a vampire, Bulma was now face to face with a bona fide living mummy. Or rather, she suspected, with a huge, muscular man who for some unfathomable reason felt like going around completely wrapped in linen bandages.

Either way, she didn't feel too at ease.

"Welcome, mister," Bulma cleared her throat, "Bandages. I suppose you're a friend of the other two, uh..."

"Freaks?" suggested the man, with a grin.

"I was looking for a more sensitive word." said the girl.

"Ha! No problem, miss. We know what we are. We all got a curse on us, no two ways about it. Me, I'm just rolling with it. This is pretty awesome, once you get used to it."

"I'm glad to hear that. And 'this' is exactly, in your case...?"

"What, you don't got any eyes?" the man squinted and leaned forward, way too close.

"Huh. The whole... being a mummy thing?"

The other nodded and chuckled. "The being a mummy thing. Pretty handy."

And to prove it, he extended his right arm - and one of his bandages unwrapped. It extended up to the water cooler, deftly grabbed one cup, put it in place, then pressed the tap long enough to fill it with water and brought it back.

"Mouth as dry as the desert's sand." the man excused himself, still grinning. "You understand."

Bulma took notes and nodded. "Remarkable. Just to make this clear, you are actually a dessiccated, mummified corpse that came back to life or...?"

"Same thing, miss." the man put down the empty cup and burped loudly. Bulma winced. "I was a normal human once. Then one day I woke up and I could do... this. With fabric - only linen, really. I didn't immediately understand its significance. Then my friend Spike helped me get it."

The girl quickly checked another sheet of paper. "Spike is the next one that I have to interview?"

"Yeah, probably. We all applied together. See, Spike really gets these things - the supernatural, all that stuff. He made me think. What's wrapped in a lot of linen? Mummies. So I saw the truth."

Bulma tried to remain as composed and professional as she could while the man leaned closer again, deadly serious. "Which is?"
"There are tombs in my land, miss. Ancient, ancient tombs and ruins. And the ancient peoples would turn their dead - you guessed it - into mummies. I am not myself any more. One of those old tormented souls has come back to haunt me, to possess me. I can feel him inside me. Sometimes it's like he's screaming his name, except with no voice, so I can't hear anything. And he has granted me power."

He went back to leaning against the back of the seat, and to his grin.

"And I'm pretty grateful for it. Thought I needed a body large enough for two, so I trained to hell and back. Now I'm really strong."

"Regarding that, would you please enter that machine on the side of the office?"

The mummy man followed Bulma's gesture to the scanner and took position. The new setup made it look like the strength of the applicant would be measured by some kind of pressure sensor upon punching, but that was only part of it, and not even the most relevant. The really important thing was the ki emission measurement. Bulma had calibrated it to Goku's base value, though there were still a lot of questions about how reliable such a measure would be since she didn't know the details of how the emission worked. For example, was it directly proportional to the amount of circulating ki, or was the law more complicated than that? Did it need to be normalised to body mass, or surface area? Without answers yet, the measure could only be a rough guideline. Still, if someone had finally scored at least in the ballpark of what Goku could reach...

Bandages threw a mighty punch at the machine. The metal creaked, the fake leather ripped, a puff of padding came out from the hole. The screen plotting the 3D schematic of monitored ki emissions flared up in a network of bright white nerves.

"You scored 1.1 Gokus." said Bulma. "You're hired."

"I did it boys!"

More cheers and clapping came from the group of the previously cloaked guys (only one was still all covered up). The mummy and the vampire fist bumped in what would have made for a very unusual heavy metal album cover image.

"I am proud of you!" announced solemnly the guy who still wore the cloak, the one who had been chatting up Yamcha all that time. "The spirit of Ramnothep that lives in you gave you the strength."

The mummy laughed. "Yeah, Ramm... well, the old guy was real nice to me. I put out some real power! Told you scrawny guys I'd take the prize home."

"Now I am almost worried for one such as myself." said the other. "I can not compare in strength to you and my power... it is too dark and dangerous to unleash on a whim."

"Nah, you'll be fine. See, I asked the girl, she said she's still got money to get two candidates, tops. 'cos I was worried for you and all. So there's no way she's going to find two options better than you among all these losers. And you're going next anyway!"

"I would hope so. Us denizens of the darkness should not be separated!"

Two more openings, and one was almost sure to be taken by the last member of this gang whose previous employer, Yamcha suspected, had to be the owner of a circus. This didn't shut down his possibilities entirely, but considering that it seemed to be first come, first served, he could have a
stroke of bad luck if he didn't come immediately after. Also, this meant something else.

"Is something the problem, Yamcha?" asked Puar, landing on his shoulder, away from the ears of the freaks next seat. "Are these people bothering you?"

"That's not it, Puar," he shook his head. "But you've heard what they said. Just two more openings. They'll take one, and then it's going to be only one of us."

Puar tilted his head. "I'm not following."

"Well, Puar, what I mean is, we can't both be hired, right? Even though I'm strong and you have magical abilities, so I was hoping that..."

"But I did not plan to be hired." said the cat.

"I know, I know, but I still added your name to the application. Thought it was a waste when we could be earning two salaries instead of only one. Not to mention, the application said the hospitality does not include keeping pets or guests."

Puar immediately froze. His mouth stiffened in a sour expression. "Let's go discuss this in private." he said.

They went to the bathroom right as the speaker was calling Mr. Spike to the interview, and the last of the four removed his cloak revealing that underneath he was wearing a ridiculous devil costume, complete with wings, horns and tail. Yamcha shook his head as he closed the door behind him.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but that's how it is."

"I'm not getting separated from you." said Puar.

"Puar, I need this job, you know how I've been living these last days and..."

"I'm not getting separated." insisted the cat, with an extremely final tone.

Yamcha sat on a toiled, grabbing his head between his hands, and sighed. "So? What do you expect me to do about it?"

"You don't have to quit. We don't need to be separated even if you get the job."

The cat flew out of the door, looked around, then slowly closed the door, then checked again from the top of the stall to make sure they were alone.

"I have an idea." he said.

"So you are...?"

"Spike the Devil." "Devil. Right. You're the last one of the group."

"The children of the night. The denizens of the darkness. Yes."

"Oh, that's how you call yourselves?"

"It's not an official name. It's just what we are."
"I see. So I imagine you too possess some kind of ability that you acquired, when, huh..."

"I was ten years old. And yes, I found out one day that I had been overtaken by the darkness, and gifted and cursed with its power."

"Uh, sure, I'm sorry I guess. Would you like to demonstrate?"

"I can't."

"Oh. Why is that?"

"My power is not for show or entertainment. It is far too dark. Whenever I unleash it, I unleash death."

Bulma took a moment to consider this. Until three interviews ago, she would have dismissed this claim as the ramblings of an innocuous buffoon. Now the ramblings and the buffoon parts remained, but she wasn't so sure about the innocuous one any more. So she put a hand under the desk where the weapons were, as naturally as possible, just to stay on the safe side.

"And what is it that makes your power so deadly?" she asked. "For the sake of knowledge."

"Knowledge is a dangerous thing, miss," said the devil, smiling wryly. "And knowledge of this sort, you may wish you had never received. Nevertheless, I see that fate demands that I reveal my secrets today. Perhaps it is for the best that I may share this burden, for once."

"Is your power activated by talking about it?" asked the girl.

"Nay, miss. Nothing of the sort."

"Then I don't see any immediate danger. If you wish to get a shot at the job..."

"But of course. You see, this power is the power of Hell itself coursing through me."

Bulma grimaced and hoped this idiot didn't really know what he was talking about.

"I possess the ability to fire a beam - a Devil Beam, as it is - which upon striking the impure, will resonate with the evil in their souls, and make them explode. You see the irony! My own enemies' malice is their ultimate demise."

"Mr. Spike," asked Bulma, calmly, "may I ask you how many enemies have you smitten in this manner?"

The man was horrified. "No one! I'm not a murderer."

"I see. So how can you know it works? Have you tried it on animals?"

"I have certainly used it on animals, back when I was a fool who did not understand the weight of his own power," Spike nodded, "but it did not do anything, for animals do not have evil souls. All it does is hit them and leave a glowing aura around them for a few moments."

The girl shook her head and sighed. "I see. And you know that it would actually surely kill any evil person it struck because...?"

"I can feel it!" exclaimed the Devil, scandalised. "Whenever I fire the beam, the dark power... the infernal malice... the Hellish Lord that I am channelling through my body, demanding his due! In no way I can doubt of the tremendous effects that it would have, should it strike anyone but the purest of
"Who even decides who counts as pure, exactly?" Bulma set aside her notes, irritated. All this talking of Hell and demons was not doing great things for her mood. "And what evidence do you have that your power isn't simply to surround whoever is hit by your beam with light?"

"I need no evidence." said the other, indignant. "Would you submit herself to my Devil Beam to prove me wrong?"

She thought about it for a second.

"Good point." she concluded. "Ok, evil beam it is. Can you please enter the machine you can see over there...?"

And finally came Yamcha's turn to enter the office. Spike the Devil had come out celebrating like all his friends before him, and the boy suddenly realised that his only two scenarios at this point were either not getting the job, or becoming a colleague of these weirdos, and he wasn't sure which option was better. Probably the one that didn't leave him to die of starvation alone in a filthy room for rent, if he wanted to be honest with himself, so giving a good impression on the interview was still paramount. He got up from his seat and tried to swagger onwards as confidently as possible. While walking past the door, however, he nervously played around with his left wristband.

This was not, as a casual observer would have imagined, because it was some kind of acquired habit he used to unload stress, or because the wristband was a good luck charm. It was, instead, because his real left wristband was in his pocket, and what he wore now around his arm was his best and currently only friend, Puar, transformed into an article of sports clothing as an infiltration strategy.

Yamcha had noted that Puar's idea was indeed quite clever, but pointed out that there was no reason to put it in practice right away - it would make far more sense for Yamcha to get the job and then, with all calm, smuggle Puar inside the complex where he would reside later, far from the eyes of Bulma Briefs, a girl that all sources reported to be insanely smart. Puar, however, had insisted that he didn't want to leave Yamcha alone at such an important moment, and that he could provide assistance, for example by squeezing gently his wrist to suggest answers to Bulma's questions.

Yamcha did not think this would help much - this wasn't an exam, after all, and all they had managed to agree upon as a code was that one squeeze meant NO and two meant YES - but it's not like he didn't feel somewhat pleased at the idea of having a familiar presence next to him during the ordeal, so he ended up going along with it. He really didn't have it in him to every say no to his little furry friend anyway.

"Please, come in."

The office looked more like a corner of a workshop that had been repurposed for the task - not exactly what he had expected from the sleek, futuristic Capsule Corporation research centre. The girl sitting at the desk in front of him might have been more or less his age, though her glasses made her look a bit older. She also was, indeed, quite hot.

Yamcha really hoped she wasn't big on the whole "reading newspapers" thing.

Bulma grabbed a copy of his application. "You are Mr. Yamcha, am I right?"

"I am a Yamcha, yes." said the boy.

"Are you implying there are others?" asked the girl. "It sounds quite an unusual name, you know."
Should I be aware of it?"

"Yes!" One squeeze. "I mean, no! But you should know it from now on. Because you should know me, your future employee."

She didn't look impressed.

"Whatever. Mr. Yamcha, this has been a long day, and I only have one more spot to offer, so I'll have to be selective. What are your powers? What do you bring to the table? Tell me why I should hire you, in a few words."

"Uhm, sure." The boy cleared his throat. "Ok, so, I am Yamcha of the Dojo of the Wolf..."

"Oh, right. Of course there's a werewolf too." sighed Bulma.

"Ah, no, I'm not with those guys! It's just a martial arts school. We have a wolf theme going on, we take inspiration from nature, ancient wisdom passed down for generations and so on. I haven't studied with them in years, but I still use their moves. My Wolf Fang Fist..."

"Yes, yes, but I'm not interested in the details." interrupted him the girl. "If I hire you, you can discuss that stuff with Goku to your heart's content. What about these previous job experiences you mention in your resume? You're not very specific."

"Well, I lived in the Red Lizard Desert, and was, uh..." Yamcha looked for words. "...a small independent import-export operator."

"I did not know there was much trade going on through the Red Lizard Desert." noted Bulma. "Last time I passed over there, it was a barren wasteland."

"Yes, business was not very good. After that I moved to this city and was a successful... ouch!" The squeeze made him catch his tongue at the last minute. It was unfair how he couldn't mention his best experience without also revealing his greatest shame.

"A successful coach." he corrected himself. "Of baseball. For children. Not professionals at all."

"Mr. Yamcha," Bulma crossed her hands in front of her face and leaned forward, "let me be frank. Your application, on its own, would not have done much to grant you this interview. Then again, what I'm looking for is hard to measure through pen and paper, so I've been taking my chances. With those people, earlier, the risk paid off - but at least they mentioned that they had been hired to fight in private tournaments in the past, so they had something to bring them to my attention. With you, however? What do you think could have possibly prompted me to call you here today?"

Yamcha felt her eyes fixated on him and shifted uncomfortably. Again, he fiddled with his wristband. Puar didn't squeeze or give any other signs of life.

"Was it my baseball..." he started.

"Of course it was your baseball career!" snapped Bulma. "The one during which you achieved consistently completely superhuman feats - something that I would have noticed earlier if in those same weeks I hadn't been completely absorbed by my research to the point of utter detachment from all human affairs. The one that was terminated in equal parts by your own stupidity and lack of self-control and by the League's commercial interests, in a rather shameful incident that I do not care in the slightest about but that it is the height of idiocy for you to assume I am not aware of. I am familiar with the notion of background checks, you know."
Yamcha blinked. "So... you don't mind?"

"Not really." she shrugged. "Nothing illegal happened, and I'm not one for gossip. If you have the abilities that I expect you to have, that's all that really matters. But the one thing I'm going to need from you if I am supposed to have you in my team is that you be honest."

"Ha, of course!" laughed Yamcha, relieved, letting go of the magical cat he was carrying around concealed as a band of cotton. "No problem there."

"Perfect. Then, you can enter that machine down there, and I'll measure your strength."

The boy walked into the scanner. He saw what looked like an ordinary punch machine - such a crude mechanism, every true martial artist would sneer at its naivete - but what he had never seen before was such an elaborate chamber surrounding it. He guessed it must have been all additional measuring equipment, but like hell he could figure out what it did. All he could say was that it looked science-y.

"Am I positioned right?"

"Yes, perfect! Please punch the machine with all your strength now."

Yamcha snickered. All his strength, she said. This was the time to amaze her. He flexed backwards, put his hands in position in front of his body, like claws ready to tear the prey's flesh asunder.

"Wolf Fang Fist!" he screamed, as he jerked forward and struck the machine with his right palm.

The machine emitted a soft 'ding' sound.

"0.95 Gokus." said Bulma, from her desk, without even raising her eyes from the notes she was writing. "Quite impressive, but not the highest I've seen today. There's good chances that you will be chosen, Mr. Yamcha, but I would first like to interview the other candidates. We will let you know."

The dreaded words had been said. Yamcha racked his brains for something, any idea he could pull off at the last minute to reverse this situation. He could not go back to being an unemployed recluse. He would go crazy in a matter of days, at this point.

"Oh, that's too bad!" he finally said, nonchalantly. "Guess you're not interested in seeing my magical abilities, then?"

Bulma's typing at the computer stopped.

"What magical abilities?" she asked. "You didn't mention anything about them in your application."

"It's because I was worried it would feel like a sham." the boy explained, leaving the scanner and going back to the office. "Handsome, strong and with mystical powers? You would have thought I was just making stuff up!"

"What could possibly give me that thought, right? You have two minutes. Demonstrate."

Sarcastic as she may be, she was falling for it. Yamcha extended his left arm in front of him, dramatically.

"My power," he announced, very loudly and clearly, "is to transform my left wristband into anything I wish it to become!"

"That seems oddly specific." objected Bulma.
"I know, right? Magic's crazy like that. Who knows what mysteries that science can not even begin to fathom are beyond the barrier of the mystical..."

"Yeah, yeah, sure. We'll see what science can fathom. Demonstration, now."

"Ok. Here we go."

Yamcha took a deep breath, squinted, tensed his arm, and generally looked very focused.

"Wristband," he screamed, "transform into a baseball!"

Puar got the drift. With a puff of smoke, the next second Yamcha was holding a baseball in his hand. He tossed it up and down a couple of times, with a confident smile; then he tossed it past Bulma, making it bounce against the wall behind her. The girl made an effort not to look fazed, but he could tell her heart had missed a beat there. He had her.

"So," he asked, while his wristband went back to the original form, "am I hired?"

Bulma thought about it for a second. She looked at him, head to feet, as if this could help her figure out what the trick was, in case there was one. She clicked her tongue, annoyed.

"You're hired," she concluded, "come back to this building tomorrow morning with your stuff, and you'll undergo your induction."

And now, for the coup de grace.

"Wonderful!" he exclaimed. "Do you care to join me for a drink to celebrate our new fruitful work relationship, then?"

One moment later, Yamcha didn't know what hurt more - her hysterical laughter, or the pain of Puar almost crushing his left wrist.
Chapter 13 - Manimal house

It often happens that we only appreciate the value of things upon losing them. So, when he woke up on the eighty-fifth day since the beginning of the Human Enhancement Program, Goku had not given much thought yet to how peaceful his life at Bulma's house had been until then.

He got up from bed, clicked a button on a recorder on his bedside table, and as a very well-educated voice started reading aloud with passion and expressivity the considerations on the ephemeral nature of life of long time dead sage Huen Shi (audiobooks had been a wonderful discovery for Goku), he started his morning exercises. Being confined to the room meant he couldn't do anything requiring much space. There would be time for that later. There was already a gym, but Dr. Briefs had also a bigger, sturdier one constructed for him and the new test subjects to practice to their heart's content without fear of collapsing the building, and this would be the first day that they got to try it. This, together with a few other buildings like the all-new dorms, had been raised in record time by a crowd of workers who had been digging, drilling and welding day and night for the last weeks. So, now that everything was ready, Goku would have expected things to become quieter.

He was wrong.

After one hour the day had gotten a lot brighter, so he finished his exercises, he shut down the audiobook and was about to go to breakfast when he remembered that Bulma wouldn't be there this morning. At 9:00 AM was scheduled the induction for the new hires. From Bulma's description the evening before, Goku had a vague idea of what they were like, but he was curious to see more. Besides, he was supposed to attend anyway. They would have coffee and biscuits, but he wasn't inclined to partake of either, so he just opened his fridge and got some milk and some leftover meat from the day before. Then he washed, picked a fresh gi (he had ten now - all identical to his old one, but bearing the Capsule Corporation logo), and left the room. The conference room where the meeting would be held was at the very entrance of the new dorm, so it was easy to find. This was his first time setting foot into the building at all, though, so he still had to follow one little arrow sign to get there. In the end, it was already 9:05. He could hear Bulma's voice behind the fire door. He pushed it open.

"Oh, I'm sure many of you have wondered about what a Goku could be." said Bulma cheerfully. "Well, there's a Goku for you!"

Four heads, with their share of fangs, bandages and horns, and a floating cap with nothing below turned to look at him.

"Nice to meet you." Goku smiled politely, giving a small bow.
"Come seat in front, Goku." Bulma waved. "Goku is my first test subject, and the person who raised my interest in the kind of superhuman potential that you all represent. He's helped me develop theories and technology that you will all benefit from during your work here. He's also been, as you may have understood, my unit of measure to evaluate your strength."

Goku sat down. From behind him, the biggest of the new guys, the one bandaged like a mummy, tapped his shoulder to get his attention.

"I scored 1.1 Gokus." he said, grinning. "That means you're 0.9 me."

"0.90 periodic." corrected Goku.

The other blinked. "What?"

"...now before we proceed further, may I ask that you all sign the contracts I put in front of you? You will see they detail your pay and benefits for the duration of this project, as well as your obligations. If you do not feel like accepting those, this is the moment to walk out of that door. Any information I need to give from now on will be strictly confidential, so you are required to accept a non-disclosure agreement that details in how many ways we can retaliate in case you leak outside info you're not supposed to. Or in simpler terms, remember: snitches get stitches."

There was some low talking as everyone browsed quickly through their contract, but in the end they all signed, and Bulma collected and stored the files.

"Perfect!" she said breaking out a wide smile. "With this, I can officially welcome you all to the Capsule Corporation Human Enhancement Program! Together, we will break new ground in discovering just what the human body is capable of, as well as understanding better the powers that exist in this universe. It is important for you to remember that while our end goal is to make this science available to all, for the betterment of all mankind, it is also liable to be a very destabilising and potentially dangerous tool in the wrong hands. Therefore, we will only disclose our discoveries once we've consolidated our knowledge, later down the line, and following a schedule and a plan that are to be carefully designed. This is why you were made to sign the NDA as a condition for working here. Yes, Fangs?"

The vampire lowered his hand. "This is all very nice and everything," he said, "but what will we be doing, in practice?"

"I was just getting to that." Bulma clicked a button, and a screen behind her lit up. "Here you can see your typical day's schedule. This could change in extraordinary circumstances, but as a general rule, you are expected to participate in tests and experiments in two time slots - morning, 10:00 to 12:30, and afternoon, 14:00 to 17:00. Different people will be assigned to each time slot every day, since we don't have the equipment and personnel to carry multiple tests at once yet. We will establish your slots on a weekly basis. The rest of your time is more flexible, but you are required to also spend at least two hours of your day training, either your strength or your special abilities. You will be given key cards with access to select areas of the facilities; these will also be used to clock your usage of the general gym. The gym is furnished with a good amount of of conventional training equipment as well as some unconventional instruments that I thought could be useful. Anything else you think could be helpful, let me know and if the reason is good enough I'll be happy to oblige. We will also hold meetings on time slots that range from 17:00 to 19:00. These will not be daily or mandatory, but participation is strongly encouraged. I plan to give you all a basic scientific foundation..."

Four faces contracted in a horrified expression. Being unable to show his, See-Through expressed his dismay by screaming "STUDYING?!" instead.
Bulma waved her hand, irritated. "I don't intend to make you major in physics. But since we do work with science here, I think it would be useful if you were able to at least understand what's going on. Any suggestion from you, who have a more instinctual feeling for what your powers entail, would be undoubtedly be quite useful. And for any discussion, you could refer to your colleague Goku, who has both a decent scientific preparation and a solid knowledge of the martial arts and the mastery of spiritual energy, so he's going to be the bridge between our worlds, so to say."

Goku heard Bandages grumble something about a 'teacher's pet' behind him. He wondered if he should punctualise that, despite his tail, he was not a pet.

The screen's image switched from a schedule to a map of the site. Several buildings were recognisable on a green background representing the pleasant meadows the Capsule Corporation facility was built on.

"Please familiarise yourself with the locations." Bulma started pointing around with a small laser as she spoke. "We are currently in the new dorm building. It has five ensuite rooms, one for each of you, a kitchenette, a living room, a small exercise room, this conference room, and a few storage facilities that you're not supposed to use. This is where you'll be spending most of your free time and where you can sleep and eat. We will keep your fridge full, but you have to cook for yourselves. There's a whiteboard in the kitchenette where you can list any requests for special food items. We will also hold our meetings here most of the time, unless there's good reason not to. Next to here is the main gym. This is where you're supposed to train. You will need your pass to enter. The gym is large enough for all of you to train at the same time, it has been reinforced, it's soundproofed, and has room not just for exercise but for sparring as well. However, considering your average level of strength, please submit any plans for sparring fights to me first. And under no circumstances is any kind of fighting supposed to happen outside of the gym. Questions?"

"You said there's only five rooms," objected Yamcha, "but there's six of us here."

"Goku's been staying in a wing of my home, inside the main building." explained Bulma. "And for now, that will continue being the arrangement. However you'll still get to spend most of your training time together. He will also be granted exclusive access to the gym during night hours."

Goku looked at Bulma puzzled, and she only made a small sign that meant I'll explain later. The rest of the audience started chatting nervously.

"Does that mean that we won't be able to train during the night?" intervened Spike, taking the lead of his group. "You realise, Miss Bulma, that darkness is the time that most befits powers such as ours."

"We will measure that, and if it turned out to be true, I could reconsider," said Bulma. "But anyway, you will still have the dorm's exercise room. It's more than enough to do a bit of weight lifting, if that's what you want. But it won't count towards your daily two hours training target, and course, no fighting will be allowed. This place isn't soundproofed or reinforced, so if you started going at it seriously you'd wake up all of West City."

"Now, your first morning here is free. You will have time to go around, visit the place, tour our main building, and just generally get used to your new workplace. Get to know each other as well. Leaving here, you will find your passes hanging from your rooms' doors. Please leave any luggage there, pick up the cards, and just go see the place. We also have an excellent cafeteria for our employees on site that you can eat at. After lunch, I would like you all to come to the main facility, the same lab where you were interviewed, as I plan to do a proper preliminary scan of all of you. We will then hold our first meeting, during which we will establish the plans for the immediate future. And one last thing. For any need or question you should have, well - Caroline?"
The soft, pleasant robotic voice answered from the environmental speakers. "Yes, Bulma? What do you need today?"

"Please recognise everyone in this room as a new resident of the campus and attend to their needs. They have passes detailing their authorizations."

"Understood. I am Caroline, the virtual assistant for this facility. I welcome you all to Capsule Corporation, and I hope your stay will be pleasant. You can call me by my name to ask for help or information from any room in the complex."

"She can hear all we say?" asked Yamcha, surprised. "Wherever we are? All the time?"

"I have very strict privacy protocols," she answered. "Audio feed from areas such as bedrooms and bathrooms is filtered through a firewall that preliminarily blocks all data from reaching me unless my name is explicitly called."

"And also, she's a robot." added Bulma. "She's not very judgemental."

"Oh, that's okay I guess," concluded the other. His hand, that was touching nervously his left wristband, relaxed.

They were dismissed, and left the conference room. Only Goku remained, as Bulma went to catch up to him.

"I need to show you something."

"Does that have to do with the gym and the night permissions?" asked the boy.

"Exactly that. Come on, follow me."

They walked out of the dorm and covered the dozen metres that separated them from the new gym. Goku had never seen it yet. The building was reinforced with metal plates and columns, and the windows were small, thick glasses sunk into deep slits.

"Here's your pass. Try it."

Bulma handed a small plastic card with a lanyard to Goku, and it took him a couple attempts to figure out how to slide it into the door's electronic lock. Finally, it opened with a blip.

Inside, the gym felt even more impressive - tall buildings weren't unusual, but not many of them were constituted of a single, massive room. It wasn't so high that he couldn't hit the ceiling with a single jump, but he would have to put his back into it.

"This is really good." he commented. "I can do a lot more training, here."

"That was the idea. But it's not all of it! Look here."

Bulma grabbed Goku's pass and inserted it into a keypad right next to the inner side of the door. Then she typed in a code. In the span of a few seconds, the building sealed itself. Metal shutters came down to cover all windows, and air ventilation and artificial lights came on.

"This is night mode." explained the girl. "Until now, during full moon nights, you simply stayed locked in a windowless storage room in our house, and that did not look the most comfortable option, so... yeah."

Goku looked around, curious. "Is it safe?"
"Absolutely. The only way to unlock it is by using this card again - this is completely decoupled from the rest of the computer system controlling the facility. Didn't want to take any risks there. In that corner, down there, there is a small room that can serve as living quarters - it's got a bed, a computer, and other stuff. But if you want to train, of course, you'll have all of this for yourself."

"But why give access to me every night?" asked Goku. "I don't need it all the time."

"Just a clever bit of misdirection. Didn't want to tip anyone off to your... special needs. Between your tail and their passion for the occult, if they also knew you need to stay locked on a full moon, even those guys could connect the dots."

"Oh, well." the boy looked at Bulma and made a small bow. "Thanks a lot."

"No problem." she smiled. "I knew you wouldn't have said a word, but I'm sure it's damn lonely alone all night in a cupboard. Hey, if you want, next full moon I can come over and we can have a movie marathon or something. Pull an all-nighter."

"Better not, for both of us. Sleep deprivation affects both physical and mental performance."

"Tsk. You can be such a downer. Anyway, this room is so big and well armoured that I'm sure that even if you did transform into a giant monster, it could probably contain you. Maybe."

Goku looked at her skeptical. "You don't know that."

"Well, only one way to be sure. If you ever felt like..." started the girl.

"No." the boy looked deadly serious. "Too risky."

"It would really be useful to observe such a phenomenon!" pleaded Bulma. "We could just go in some deserted place with nothing around, and do it right before the Moon sets so you immediately would turn back! Just a minute!"

Goku shook his head. "I'm just not going to do it. I don't want to."

"Ok, fine." Bulma sighed. "Sorry if I asked. That was rude of me, I guess."

"A bit."

They stood in silence for a minute.

"But anyway, thanks for the refuge. This is good." said Goku, finally.

"Glad you liked it. You going to train now?"

"Probably." the boy started stretching. "I also need to finish reading a couple books. I'll go get them back in my room."

"Alright, see you this afternoon then! And can I ask you a favour?"

Goku stopped before running out of the door. "Sure."

"You're going to spend the next months working with these guys," said Bulma, "so why don't you try to meet them and get to know them a bit more? Maybe when they gather for lunch. It'll be really useful if they trust you enough to look for your help. You can probably understand their training needs much better than me."
"Okay, that sounds easy." said the boy, and running off.

Yamcha dumped the gym sac with all his belongings on the bed. With a puff of smoke, Puar reverted into his regular blue floating cat form, having been a wristband for the better part of the morning. Good thing too, the smoke, being magical, simply dissolved in mid-air. It would have been a problem had it triggered the fire alarm.

"This is pretty good." commented Yamcha. "Scratch that, compared to the last room we lived in, this is amazing! Is that an air conditioner?"

"I think it is." said Puar. "And it's alright. Too bad for the neighbours."

"Who, those weirdos? Oh, come on, I'm sure they're not as bad as they look. Damn, look here!"

He had ran into the ensuite bathroom, whose door was right next to the entrance.

"A shower and a bath tub! They don't even have taps, it's all buttons, I have no idea what they all do."

The cat floated past him. "I think that one activates environmental light effects."

"I love this! If this is the kind of luxury you live in here, I don't ever want to go away."

Puar frowned, but said nothing. He floated back into the main room.

"There's a screen here." he announced. "A computer of some kind."

"Caroline," asked Yamcha, loudly, "what is the computer for?"

"Hello, Yamcha." the robotic voice was melodious as always. "That is the multi-purpose infotainment system. It can provide you with access to TV, radio, a vast catalogue of streaming movies and shows, including a selection of adult-themed videos, access to the internet, and exclusive access to the entirety of Capsule Corporation's digital library."

"Well, that does it. This is the life! Thank you, Caroline, you're dismissed."

Caroline left with a polite blip sound, and Yamcha started going through his luggage, grabbing clothes and stuffing them in the drawers.

"I've got all morning and lunchtime before starting with work." he said, having finished. "I think I'll go see the place a bit, chat the guys up. That Goku kid especially. Besides looking the most normal of the bunch, he seems to be buddies with Bulma. It's a good thing to butter up the people in charge a bit."

"I can't help but notice that you're talking in the singular there." said Puar, worried.

"Well, sure. You didn't want to come with me, now?"

In response, Puar transformed back into the wristband.

"Oh, no, come on, man! Aren't you tired of staying in that form? I can't let you spend your days by doing nothing except being a piece of fabric and going with me wherever I go."

"I don't mind." said Puar.
"I do! That's crazy. You'll be out of your mind with boredom in no time at that rate. Listen, you know what? I'll need your help anyway after lunch, because we'll have the tests, so I need to show my so-called magic. So why don't you chill out in this room until then? Use the computer, watch something, have fun. I'll go around a bit and then I will pick you back up later. I'll also bring along something to eat from the cafeteria."

"But I don't want to chill out. I want to be useful to you."

"You're not going to be by just staying as a wristband with me all the time! You want to be useful, why don't you study from that library, then? I get the feeling I could need some science suggestions now and then if I want to look good with the management here."

Puar was back in cat form - just so he could pout better. "I don't like this."

"Well, I'm not letting you do anything else. Sorry, man, but you have to take your time. We don't even know if you can keep your transformation up for this long without rest. You've never done it before."

"I can." insisted the other.

"And what if you're wrong? You want to be the one to explain Bulma why there's a blue cat wrapped around my arm if you break transformation, and why she shouldn't fire me on the spot?"

The cat made a displeased sound, tilted his head sideways, crossed his tiny arms - or rather, paws.

"Have it your way." he said, finally.

"Perfect! See you later then. And remember - don't call Caro... the robot lady! She doesn't know you're in here too."

Yamcha left, waving and closing the door behind him. Puar frowned, then sat at the computer. Touching the screen, he browsed the system to find the digital library, then started looking for good books to begin with. A lot of that stuff seemed really really difficult, he thought. Then he found something called 50 fun things you didn't know about science!, and decided it may as well be a good starting point as any. Maybe there would be something that could help Yamcha in there.

Dear reader,

if you've never understood much of all those complicated formulas and theorems, if you've slept through all your science classes at school, well, then, this book is exactly for you...

That sounds easy, Goku had said, about establishing some sort of human connection with five perfect strangers who all seemed to speak and think in ways completely different from his. Turns out, it wasn't. At lunch Goku sat alone in a corner of the cafeteria. He was sure it was just a matter of finding the right moment to break the ice, but that moment obstinately failed to present itself. The newcomers had entered the place ten minutes ago now. First had come the four weirder guys, joking and chatting among themselves loudly. They all had their costumes, which had drawn the attention of all the ordinary Capsule Corporation employees having lunch there. The only one without a costume was the invisible one, who was wrapped into layers and layers of all sorts of clothing, including a balaclava and sunglasses, which still looked very freaky - though not as much as it would have been if one noticed that through the gaps there was nothing to see at all. Then came the guy who wore a red and green gi, long black hair, and seemed cocky as hell. From what he had heard from Bulma, this was the second strongest of the bunch, and almost as strong as he. The one thing
that Goku felt would really break the ice (and that he was really eager to try) was a fight, but that had been barred for now, so he needed another strategy.

So he dove his nose back into the book that he was reading, while using one hand to pick rice with his chopsticks and bring it to his mouth.

"Hey, kid. May I sit here?"

The cocky guy was next to the table, with a tray of food he had bought, smiling. Clearly, the strategy had worked.

"Sure." said Goku, turning another page.

"Nice. I'm Yamcha, by the way. Of the Dojo of the Wolf."

"I think I've read about it." the kid finally raised his eyes. "Wolf Fang Fist?"

"That!" he laughed. "Man, I hoped I could find someone who really knew their stuff about martial arts."

"Well, to be precise, my grandpa said that only a bunch of buffoons would think that aping a pack of dogs could make for good fighting technique."

To this, Yamcha's enthusiasm somewhat died down. "Oh. And do you agree?"

"I've never seen it for myself. And as Bulma says, experience isn't just the best teacher - it's the only one."

"Seems like you and Bulma are close." Yamcha started picking from his carton of chips. "I hope I'm not being too nosy but - you two an item?"

Goku blinked.

Yamcha coughed. "Yeah, I mean, are you her boyfriend?"

"I'm a boy, and her friend." said Goku. "And no, we're not mating."

Yamcha laughed loudly. "You're funny, you know? So what do you think of her? How'd you meet her?"

"Not sure she'd want me to talk about all the details," Goku now attacked his dish of pickled eggplant. "All I can say is, she found me living in the mountains, where I used to stay, and we had common interests. I gave her the idea of this project, and I thought I could learn one thing or two coming with her to the city."

"Ha. Following the dream of the big city, eh? Just like me. Everything's better here, or so we think before coming."

"Everything is surely different." the boy nodded. "Better, I would not know. But I like how many things I get to learn. I haven't been much around to see how it is, anyway. Only that one time me and Bulma went seeing places, I guess."

Yamcha leaned in. "Places? What kind of places?"

"Museums. Some bright noisy place called a Luna Park." Goku thought about it a moment. "We had ice cream."
"That sounds like a date. You sure you're not her boyfriend?"

"I am. We had already met when Bulma was still looking for one."

This was interesting news. Yamcha opened his mouth ready to ask for more, but approximately at that moment, a projectile flew through the room and came dangerously close to hitting Goku's cheek. He spotted it; thought about dodging; realised he didn't have enough time to avoid it entirely; and ended up shielding himself and deflecting it with his book, all in a fraction of a second. Unfortunately, the bullet happened to be a small ball of potato mash. The resulting high speed impact caused a small starchy explosion that soaked both the cover of Goku's book and his companion.

"WHAT THE HELL!" screamed Yamcha. "What are you people doing?"

Laughter came from the table of the four freaks. Bandages got up and started apologizing - still chuckling uncontrollably, which didn't really make his apologies very believable.

"We didn't mean that, sorry, sorry," he said, with his usual grin, "we were playing among ourselves, and you just happened to be in the way."

"Yeah, fuck that." Yamcha was cleaning himself with a napkin. "Don't give me that crap. You knew we were sitting here. Just don't act like some middle school kid and this sort of stuff won't happen."

"Come on, we're only having some fun. Why would we do that to you on purpose? We're all colleagues here." the mummy turned to Goku, made a small bow. "By the way, we haven't been introduced yet. I'm Bandages."

"Nice to meet you," said the other, putting the book back on the table, potato side up, "I'm Goku."

"We know, we know. Over there - the charming devil is Spike. The one with a pale complexion is Fangs. And the one with a very pale complexion is See-Through."

See-Through had taken his balaclava off to eat, and was waving. One of the other employees eating noticed him and screamed.

"Well met." Goku remembered that he really was supposed to socialise. "Are you enjoying the place?"

"Oh, it's good, really good." Bandages nodded vigorously. "Very nice rooms, you have here. And the gym seems cool too. Looking forward to training with you. Maybe we'll get to see you in action with more than a book in your hand, yeah?"

"I wouldn't know." said Goku "I usually keep reading while training."

"Ha! Well, that won't do. You gotta commit, when training. No surprise I'm stronger than you." said the mummy, casually.

Yamcha realised Bandages was clearly one of those kind of guys. Pretty much every dojo and tournament had one. He hoped Goku wasn't the type to take the bait.

"Quite the contrary," replied the boy with absolute innocence, "I believe that even if one has the upper hand in power, more knowledge can tip the overall balance in someone else's favour."

Yamcha quickly picked up his stuff, left the table, and started putting a safer distance between him and those two.
Bandages gritted his teeth. "Are you calling me stupid?"

"Here we are again." sighed Fangs.

Spike intervened. "Come on, my friend, he is just a kid - I am sure he didn't mean to..."

"Stay out of this. I want to hear it from him." the mummy looked Goku straight in his eyes. "You calling me stupid?"

"I'm not." answered the other calmly. "If you don't feel like you are one, you have nothing to fear."

"Oh, so that's it? You insult me, then pretend you said nothing? That's too damn easy, boy. Maybe you should just read a little less and pump a little more iron. Would give you the muscle to back your words! Whoever put these ideas in your mind was an idiot and a shit master."

Goku got up from his chair. No one of the presents knew him well enough to appreciate fully the rarity of what they were seeing, as his eyes were burning with anger.

"My grandpa was not an idiot nor a shit master. You take that back."

"If you don't feel like he was one, you have nothing to fear." said Bandages,mocking his voice.

Goku drew a deep breath.

"Fine. I see you need some empirical evidence in support of my stance." he said. "Gym. Right now."

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After reading five of them, Puar had started suspecting that the *50 fun things* weren't really that fun; more, like, poorly disguised as such. That he couldn't stop thinking about where Yamcha was, what Yamcha was up to, who Yamcha talked with, didn't help. So he had started working his way down the quality ladder in terms of entertainment and distractions. Right now he was at *Cyborgs vs. Aliens 2: the revengeance*.

Well, the movie was labelled as science fiction, so there ought to be *some* science in it.

"Mr. Cyborg!" cried Tim, the human teenager who clearly had not died even amidst the furious clash of powers surrounding him to keep serving his inane role as an audience self-insert. "We need to defuse this bomb before it blows up the Earth, but you can't defuse bombs!"

The cyborg stared at the kid for long seconds that could have been really precious in defusing the bomb, then extracted a small diskette from a case he carried with him, and inserted it in a slot he revealed in the middle of his chest. His eyes went blank for a second.

"Now I can." he announced finally with a cold robotic voice, removing the diskette.

Well, that would be convenient, thought Puar. If only he could do that instead of having to read those books.

And then he had the weirdest realisation. Maybe *he could* do that.

He paused the movie, and opened up an internet browser. He looked up a website that sold computers, and sure enough, there was a nice photo of their best laptop model. He also had to understand how would one go about connecting a computer to another and moving data between them - this was a bit tedious, but apparently diskettes weren't much in fashion any more. There were cables for that stuff, but most importantly, one could also connect wirelessly. A tutorial taught him...
the essentials about it, and how to check whether the room's computer allowed for it.

Magic is a weird thing. Transforming into another object, for example, for Puar, did not require him to understand all the details of that object - that would have been absurd. He would not have been able to transform into anything, that way (or for that matter, go back to his original form after transforming). Rather, there was a vague threshold that required knowledge of the object's appearance and its functionality, pretty much all that one would have needed to have a complete mental image of what that object was. Once transformed, even without detailed knowledge, all the required functionality would be mapped appropriately onto any analogue structures. For example, if he transformed into a dog, heavens forbid, he could easily bark and communicate with other dogs in their simple (honestly, crude and barbaric) form of language. He could also still talk in human words, though, by exerting specific will to do so.

So, he thought, this was worth a shot.

With a pirouette, Puar disappeared in the usual cloud of smoke and rematerialised as a laptop computer. He activated his wifi connection and managed to identify the signal he needed to answer to. It felt much like trying to recognize a familiar voice among an incoherent screaming chorus. Once he got the hang of it, communicating wasn't hard - as he had hoped, the exchange of information felt like talking, though with a very limited vocabulary that only allowed basic exchanges like "who are you?" and "gimme that". He asked for the book he was reading earlier. The information flowed almost instantly into Puar's modem and then hard drive - and thus, his memory. One second later, he realised he finally remembered all those annoying facts by heart. Sure, he didn't really understand them, but this was good enough. There would be time to go through the material. Encouraged by his first success, he decided to look for something more complex.

For now, Fundamentals of Mechanics would do.

Panchy had just finished putting the last of the cream puffs on top of a carefully designed pyramid when the ground shook violently with a deep, low booming sound. The puffs started tumbling down, but she deftly managed to snatch them all before they hit the floor. Still, this was annoying.

"Bulma, sweetheart," she called, "what is your father doing?"

"This couldn't be him." answered the girl. "He's putting up acoustic motion sensors in front of my bedroom and yours."

Panchy was a bit dumbfounded. "Wait, why is he doing that?"

"Because we now have an invisible man on site and I don't want to take any risks. Nevermind that, what is going on?"

A second boom shook the house. This time one of the puffs fell down, much to Panchy's dismay.

"This can't be. It's just the first day!"

The gym was soundproof, of course - but its foundations didn't have dampeners. This might have been a mistake, but at least now it was allowing her to immediately realise that her instructions were being explicitly ignored.

"Someone's getting fired on day one." she muttered. Her first impulse was to just go storm into the gym and put an end to whatever madness was going on, but on second thought, being physically present in the middle of a brawl violent enough to cause localised earthquakes may not be the
smartest choice. She ran up to her room and sat at her computer.

"Caroline, give me a video feed of the gym."

"Certainly, Bulma."

The screen showed an image of the vast room, with multiple points of view to choose from. In the middle of the scene was, well, a blur.

"Activate high framerate mode for the cameras that support it," asked Bulma, "and then replay in slow motion."

With 1000 fps, the two fighters finally became visible. Bandages was flailing around wildly with his linen stripes, trying to grab the other fighter, who was instead deftly dodging, slipping through the tentacular fabric, and closing in the distance from his opponent.

The other fighter being Goku, of all things.

On the side, Yamcha, Spike and Fangs were visibly excited - looked like they were passionately rooting for one or the other side, screaming and shaking their closed fists. See-Through wasn't very good at being visibly anything, but he still managed to get noticed, as he had taken off his jacket and was waving it around like a flag. The slow motion camera made them seem frozen in a weird grimace.

Bulma skipped quickly ahead. Goku kept dodging until Bandages managed to get a hold of him - at which point, however, the linen caught fire, and the mummy had to withdraw it and stomp it. Goku took advantage to get past his guard and hit him with a hook to his chin. He had focused his ki locally and heated up his skin with a diffuse low emission - even through her annoyance with this episode, Bulma couldn't help but grin at the boy's creativity. He had been developing by the day since the beginning of the program.

There was another small quake. Skipping ahead a bit more - this was all happening in a matter of seconds, after all - she saw the cause. Bandages had managed to grab Goku once and this time he had not wasted any time in tossing him towards the nearest wall. The kid had been smashed at full force into the plate of metal. Bulma reeled, feeling his pain, but he actually seemed to be fine, because next thing, he ran at Bandages, firing small ki globelets from his fingers. The shining bullets zipped past the mummy, who grinned and carelessly rushed towards Goku - just to be hit on the back by the bullets that had changed trajectory mid-air, and turned around like a boomerang. He screamed in pain as his bandages caught fire, and immediately started rolling on the floor to put them out. Bulma restored normal playback speed, and there he still was; Fangs was getting a fire extinguisher.

This had gone on long enough, and if there was something Bulma didn't want to have to do, it was explaining a case of potentially deadly injuries inflicted via superpowered martial arts to the cops. She clicked on the button that would connect her microphone to the speaker system in the gym.

"WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU GUYS DOING?"

Everyone came to a standstill - including Fangs, who kept spraying Bandages with fireproof foam even past the moment when the fire was put out and he started simply coughing, sputtering and protesting.

"Fighting." said Goku, plainly.

"I can see that! So, the one thing I had explicitly said you shouldn't do!"
"You almost killed me, you midget!" roared Bandages, jumping up. He was promptly stopped by Spike and Yamcha, who went to grab him.

"Don't be overdramatic - and you don't get to complain anyway!" said Bulma. "After starting a fight... you can begin packing your stuff for what I care!"

"That would not be very fair, miss Bulma. Goku was the one who started it." said Spike.

The others nodded. Goku looked away, a bit dejected.

"Caroline," asked Bulma, incredulous, "do you confirm?"

"Affirmative. I have the recordings of the cafeteria, where the incident started. While he was provoked, Goku was the one to suggest that they settle the matter with a fight."

Bulma sighed. This was definitely not something that she expected. And it was not like she could just fire Goku - in fact, she didn't even pay him.

Now that she thought about it, that may actually have been a bit unfair, at that point.

"Goku, you come to talk with me. Right now. Everyone else, lunchtime is over, so go prepare for our afternoon testing session. Change and come back to the laboratory in fifteen minutes. For now there will be no sanctions - but in the future, you are to actively defuse any situations before they get to this point! Simply saying that someone else started it won't be enough. Dismissed."

The feed closed, and Bulma let herself slump back into her seat.

Science she could crack, but from the looks of it, handling this bunch promised to be much trickier.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to all for reading!

@S_Andromeda: no, they didn't, that was back in Chapter 3. In this version Bulma simply flew over the desert and Yamcha decided to quit his bandit activity for lack of victims!
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the idea and characters of Dragon Ball are owned by Akira Toriyama. This is a simple non-profit fan parody.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 14 - Strangest Things

The kid had woken up with a pleasant feeling, like it was a very bright day - one of those days when the sun shines through your window and brings you into the morning sweetly, to a clear sky and warm air. He sat up on his bed. Outside the window, it was raining; yet everything was bright, brighter than he'd ever seen it. He blinked.

Even with his eyes closed, he still saw everything.

His heart jumped in his chest. He pulled his hands out of the blanket. From the pajamas' sleeves came nothing. Two bloodless stumps. Yet he could feel them - move the fingers. He looked inside, the entire sleeve was empty.

He screamed and scrambled out of the bed. Stripped himself naked, ripped the pajamas from his body, looking for a place, any place, of his body to still call his own. He found nothing. Under the clothes was only a void. A void he could touch and feel, but still a void.

His mother opened the door, drawn by the noise. She called him by name, looked around. Asked where he was, what had happened.

"I'm here, mom." sobbed the air in the middle of the room, where tears were dropping out of nothing.

Goku found Bulma in the lab, giving the last small tunings to the ki scanner for the afternoon experiments. When he arrived in the room, she stopped working and turned to face him. Her stare was more incredulous than angry.

"Goku," she asked, "what happened?"

The kid avoided her eyes and found a stool to perch himself on and sulk.

"I got angry." he explained. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, well, that's okay then, all solved!" the girl exclaimed. "No, seriously, what the heck happened?"

"It's all my fault. Don't punish the others."
"I'll be the judge of that. And I have the recordings anyway, so it's not like you can hide me the facts. I just want to understand what were you thinking."

"I told you. I got angry." The boy turned around, but still kept his eyes low. "Bandages kept insulting my grandpa."

Bulma walked next to him. "Did he insult your grandpa specifically? Did he know him?"

Goku shook his head. "He just insulted whoever taught me. He was simply being cocky because your machine said he was stronger than me. Thought that me reading was stupid."

"Oh, I see. So, basically, he was bullying you. Well, I won't fire him - you already saw to that. Literally." she giggled. "But he won't get away completely scot-free either."

"No, look, it was my fault!" said the boy, alarmed. "I don't want him to be punished because of this."

"He provoked you. He's got his part of fault in this. Which doesn't mean that you don't too. You gave in to your impulses - you wanted to humiliate him, to prove that you were stronger. Well, you did that too, which actually means I should understand better whether that's just down to skill, or if my way of measuring relative power is wrong."

"I think he was more powerful than me." admitted Goku. "I mean physically. He's got a very strong punch. But he wasn't as fast, due to his body size. It's split fractions of a seconds, but in combat, they matter. I believe it's just a scaling effect - even reinforced by ki, a human body still follows the square-cube law. You should adjust your measurements accordingly. But he had those bandages that compensated well. I could have lost if not for my superior control of ki. He couldn't fire it at all, and it was likely his first time fighting someone who could."

"And you were really impressive there!" Bulma finally let her enthusiasm show, forgetting completely that she was supposed to be angry. "You used skin level ki to burn the bandages, right? And then that fine control with those small bullets! You never showed me anything of that."

Goku nodded. "I was perfecting those techniques. I didn't show them to you because they didn't feel ready yet. Also, I don't know how much of scientific interest they could be."

"I'm sure something will pop up. That was great stuff!"

"Still, I only won thanks to that advantage. Which made me think that perhaps Bandages was kind of right. Not about my grandpa, but about my training. I'm slacking off. Perhaps I read a bit too much, and that affects my effectiveness."

"There's no such thing as reading too much." asserted Bulma confidently. "But I understand that you may feel like it takes time from your training. Which actually reminds me that I wanted to give you these."

She opened her desk's drawer and extracted a pair of unusual glasses. They were thin and sleek in design, with a single clear lens crossing their entire width. On the sides were two small buttons.

"What are they?" asked Goku, turning them around in his hands, fascinated.

"Capsule Corporation Rear Projection Glasses." she explained. "We put them out a couple of years ago. There was a fad, every company made theirs. It didn't really stick, so for now they're discontinued, but I managed to dig these out. What they do is, you wear them like glasses, but they're actually a screen."
The boy put them on. Bulma pushed one of the two buttons on the side, and they lighted up. A wall of text appeared before Goku's eyes - superimposed to the rest of the world, without covering it.

"You control them with your eyes. Move around the pupils, and blink once or twice to confirm or go back. This way, you can read much more comfortably while exercising, without even a need to use audiobooks and earbuds. What do you say?"

"They're pretty amazing." said Goku, looking up to Bulma. For a dozen seconds, he frantically moved his eyes in all directions, trying to get the glasses to react. Then he gave up. "Thanks."

Bulma laughed. "You're welcome. You'll understand how they work in no time, you only need some practice. Now, on to something else - I realised you don't have a salary, despite being a part of the experiment as much as everyone else."

"I don't really need money." said Goku, still frantically gesticulating with his eyes. "I have all I need here."

"Sure, but this is a matter of being fair. And once you have money, you can figure out what to do with it. Long story short, I'd like to give you an allowance of sorts. Unofficially, because I can't contract you any more since my dad only gave me money for five people, so I'll just use my personal funds."

"Uh, thanks." the boy took off the glasses. "You know, though, I thought you called me here to scold me. Now I'm leaving with these amazing new glasses and money. Do you know about positive and negative reinforcement?"

"What cheek!" Bulma flicked his forehead. "I'm being magnanimous, country boy! Be grateful that I trust you to be smart and wise enough not to do anything like this any more. Use your head in the future, it's big enough. Plus, now that I pay you, I have something to threaten to take away from you."

"Something I don't need nor asked for?" Goku shrugged. "Doesn't make much sense."

"Don't tempt me. Here, you want to be punished? So be it. I demand that when we'll have our experiment session - in about five minutes, by the way - you go to Bandages, bow, and apologise for your actions. And actually see if you can make things work this time! I know he was being a jerk, but for the sake of not having this little project end up with my house reduced to smouldering ruins, try to be bigger than that. Especially since now you know you can kick his ass."

Yamcha opened the door to his room. He had only ten minutes to change and wash himself, or he'd come to the afternoon experiment session smelling like potatoes. Also, he needed to get Puar to transform and come with him, since there surely would be tests of his supposed magic abilities.

The room was dark, only illuminated by the blue glow of the computer screen.

"Puar?"

No one answered, at first. Then suddenly a weak voice called from a corner of the room. Two feline eyes twinkled in the darkness.

"I'm here." said Puar. "I missed you."

"Hey, it was just a couple of hours!" laughed Yamcha. "What's with all this gloominess?"
"The light was annoying," whispered the cat, weakly. "You know, it felt much... much longer."

"Huh." the boy drew the curtains of the room, and light finally inundated it. "I leave you a bit, and you're a wreck already? I thought you'd pass the time reading!"

"I did. I read a lot."

Puar floated up. He looked at Yamcha with a strange stare - as if his eyes were watching something else, something behind and beyond them.

"I know things now. I know the first 300 digits of pi and the formulas of the spherical harmonics up to the fiftieth order. Did you know? The curl of a gradient is always zero."

"The what of what? I didn't make you to be such a nerd." Yamcha turned around to look at his friend, now a bit worried. "What does that even mean?"

The cat thought about it long and hard. "I have no idea." he concluded finally, defeated.

"Ok, that's more like you." Having quickly tossed his dirty clothes into the laundry basket, the boy walked into the bathroom and turned on the shower. He started singing the latest hit of a popular idol (whom he had dated for a week or so, before her producer told him to make himself scarce).

Puar kept pacing back and forth - if one can say that of a floating creature, at least - mumbling nonsense to himself and squinting to avoid the light that he had suddenly become very sensitive to. Finally, Yamcha came out, drying his hair with a towel. He grabbed a fresh gi and quickly dressed up, but left one of his wristbands on the bed.

"You know the gig." he said with a smile.

Puar looked puzzled for a moment, then a faint light of understanding appeared in his eyes. He transformed into a wristband, as he had already done twice.

"There we are! Are you ready to go?"

"One four one five nine two six..."

"Puar!" Yamcha pinched and pulled the fabric of the wristband. "A bit of focus here?" "Sorry." said the wristband. "I spaced out. I'm ready."

"Perfect! Let's go show what we can do!"

The cellar was cool and dark; the only light filtered through fissures in the trapdoor that led outside. Particles of dust danced in those blades of sunlight. The air was stale and humid.

One of the wooden planks in the trapdoor moved, then was violently torn from its place. In the hole left open crawled a boy, grinning. He wore two goats' horns, tied and kept around his head with a bandana.

"Are you here?" he asked, to the empty cellar.

"Go away." answered the cellar.

The boy wasn't fazed. "You're the son of the farmer, right? The one they say died three years ago? I heard the stories. They keep you in here?"
The voice came weak, hesitant. "I'm witched. They all know. They're keeping me in here because here it doesn't make any difference, if they can see me or not. They think it can make me go back to being normal. You better stay away from me, or you could catch it too."

"Bit too late for that." the kid started running around, arms flailing, trying to grasp the air. "Where are you?"

"You're witched too?" asked the voice, surprised.

"Yes. I have a curse. Got ya!"

The boy's hand closed around something, in mid-air. The something pulled for a moment, tried to wrestle free, then relaxed.

"Don't worry. I won't use my power on you. I've come to take you out of here."

"Why?" asked the voice, anxious. "Can you make me normal again?"

"No - we're not normal. We're special. We have a fate that we need to bear - but you can't do it inside a freakin' cellar!"

"There's more of you?"

"Two others. I think with you, that makes all the witched kids of the village. We're living out in the ruins, in the middle of the forest, and no one's really looking for us anyway - don't think they miss us especially. They won't miss you either. Hey, they may not even notice!"

"...the ruins? Aren't they haunted?"

"Sure they are. By us."

The voice stayed silent for a long while. Then, finally, "Ok", it said, and the dust on the floor was lifted in puffs by small quick steps.

They reached the hole in the trapdoor and slipped through. Outside, in the bright spring day, a boy saw the sun for the first time in three years, but the sun didn't see him back.

Goku arrived in the laboratory when the experiments had already started. Right out of the bat he was greeted by Yamcha.

"Hey, Goku! How did it go? Bulma pulled your ears?"

"Oh, hi. No, of course. She's not so strong that it would hurt anyway."

"I meant just... nevermind. Good to see you didn't seem to have it too bad. Hey, what are those glasses? Cool!"

The layout of the laboratory had been rearranged a bit for the occasion. The punch machine used for the interviews had been removed from the scanner, and so had one half of the scanner's spherical structure itself, leaving it open on one side, in order to make room for those whose powers would require some space to be used properly. The software and sensors had also been recalibrated so that, instead of focusing on the known spectral signatures of ki, they could capture emissions all around. Finally, right in front of the open side of the scanner, in a cage on a stool, was a live chicken, clucking cluelessly.
Bandages was being tested at the moment, and he could be seen swinging fabric around in patterns under Bulma's directions. In the empty area of the lab there were a few small chairs where the other subjects waited for their turn. Goku grabbed a chair next to Yamcha, while the others were sitting in a their own group.

After five minutes or so, the measurements were over. The mummy walked back to his place, drying his sweat with a towel, and told Fangs it was now his turn. Goku observed the scene, absent-minded.

"So, before all that happened," started Yamcha, "you were talking about Bulma looking for a boyfriend."

"I should apologise." said the boy, suddenly.

"No, it's fine! I'm actually interested in knowing more about..."

"I meant to Bandages."

"Oh. That." Yamcha threw a sideways glance at the other bunch. "You sure? He doesn't seem the brightest fellow. I don't think he'll be very graceful about it."

"That has nothing to do with it." answered the kid. "It is his choice to refuse the apology. But I still owe it to him."

He got up from his chair. Yamcha didn't feel very sure about this being a good idea for him. There was some whispering between the devil guy and the mummy, then the latter got up too. The two walked towards each other, and met halfway through, the massive Bandages towering over the tiny Goku.

They simultaneously bowed at right angles.

"I'm sorry!" they said in unison.

There was a moment of confusion; they both opened their mouths to speak; closed them; then finally a tacit agreement was reached that Bandages would go first.

"I apologise for speaking like I was all better than you." grumbled the man, looking sideways and scratching his cheek with a finger. "Spike is right, you're only a child, but I acted like one. Plus you throw a mean punch and know a lot of great tricks. Whoever trained you was not a shit master."

"I let anger get the better of me. I am sorry." replied Goku. "My grandfather was the only person who raised me, and he taught me martial arts as well. I do not take well to insults aimed at him. I lost my calm, and I shouldn't have. And I had underestimated you - you are a good fighter. I apologise for that too."

"Heh." Bandages grinned. "Well, you beat me still. Gotta give me a second chance some time."

The kid smiled and raised his head. "With Bulma's blessing and no hard feelings involved, sure. I would love to."

Spike caught up to the scene, smiling at the reconciliation. "I'm glad to see things are working out! See, Bandages, I told you he did not mean ill. Nice to meet you in person, Goku. I'm Spike the Devil, first of the denizens."

"He's our boss." said the mummy.
"I wouldn't say boss." said Spike defensively. "More like, the gang grew up around me."

"He always looked out for us," explained the man to Goku, pointing a finger. "Like your grandpa for you, I suppose."

"Well, pleased to make your acquaintance-OUCH!" Goku stopped mid-sentence with a scream of pain. "Did someone step on my tail?"

The others looked around confused. "No one that I can see." said Yamcha, shaking his head.

"Oh, sorry, it's me then." said See-Through, from behind the kid. "Must have put my foot on it without noticing. Does it hurt?"

"It's not too bad." said Goku, coiling his tail a bit around his waist so that he could massage it with his hand. "It used to hurt a lot more when I was small. I would lose all my strength and get dizzy. But my grandpa kept insisting that I should train it because every story where a warrior has a single weak point ends up with them being killed by someone who finds out. So I reinforced it a lot, and now it only hurts a bit if you squeeze it."

"But if you don't mind me asking, that tail is a most curious thing." Spike came closer. "How did you get it?"

"I always had it. Until two months ago, I did not know it was an uncommon occurrence at all."

"I see. It did not grow overnight at some point, hm?" He turned around, looking at it from different angles. Goku shifted a bit uneasily under the scrutiny. He finally unwrapped the tail and let it show better, then relaxed it to its usual position.

"Spike, do you think he is...?"

"A denizen of the darkness such as us?" The man rose up and took a thoughtful stance. "Who knows. Maybe, See-Through. The Other Side manifests in many ways. We will never know them all."

"Oh, don't try to drag him into your nonsense!" Yamcha put a hand on Goku's shoulder and pulled him a bit towards himself. "He doesn't believe in that stuff. Right, Goku?"

"I am sceptical of any powers carrying intrinsic moral qualities, such as being evil or dark. But considering that we are part of an experimental program aimed at understanding magic better, it would be foolish not to keep an open mind."

Yamcha paused for a moment. "Wait, did you agree with me or...?"

There wasn't much time for an answer. Spike seized the moment and grabbed Goku's shoulder, snatching him from Yamcha's hand and pulling the boy towards him.

"An open mind!" he said, nodding with satisfaction. "Yes, that sounds like the right attitude. So, tell me more. You have a monkey's tail. Do you feel any kind of... affinity for these animals?"

"Affinity?" Goku frowned. "Not any more than you should, I guess. We are evolutionarily close but..."

"Oh, this is not a science thing. So let's say no. Do you ever feel like you possess an animal side?"

The boy hesitated. "We all have some degree of animal instincts."
"Well, sure, but I'm talking about something more than the basic ones. For example, even without transforming, Fangs feels often a compulsion to feed on either blood or insects. Worst thing is, he doesn't like either."

"I'm not sure." said Goku. "I guess... when fighting... I can get a bit wild. Sometimes it's like I don't know myself anymore, and I only focus on hurting the enemy."

"Hah! We're on the right track then. Tell me, have you ever noticed any other animal-like trait in you? Any other manifestation? Perhaps some excess hairiness? Unusual vocalizations? Uncommon vitality?"

The kid's eyes widened. "Whenever I am wounded, I tend to heal very quickly. My grandpa always told me he couldn't believe how I survived that one time I hit my head."

"You see? Everything comes back to a single root - nothing is a coincidence!" Spike clapped his hands, satisfied. "Then, however, nothing of this is a supernatural ability. Animal spirits exert a wide variety of effects on those they possess. In some cases, these may be partial manifestations. However by far the most common symptom is some kind of transformation."

Hearing that, Goku stiffened. His tail slowly coiled up, nervously.

"I see." the devil smiled and patted his shoulder. "I shall not investigate further, my friend. We will talk when you are ready to."

"How do you know these things?" asked the boy, in a thin voice.

"The Other Side is mysterious, but it often follows precise patterns." explained the other, gravely. "Many things have been said and written on this. There are symbols and analogies and things that repeat themselves. To those well versed in understanding the darkness, they are less occult than to the others. And, why, I live in it. Friends!" he then announced, facing the other two. "It appears that Goku could become the newest addition to our company! I believe he, too, is a denizen of the darkness such as us. His tail is the sign."

Bandages whistled. "Wow, congrats boy. Not every day we find people like us! This must be a relief."

"Not really." said Goku. "No offense to you all - but even if your guess is right and my oddities have the same origin as yours, I do not believe knowing it helps me much. Unless you know something more about what exactly that origin is?"

"The Other Side." said the three in unison.

"Which would be?" asked the kid.

"The mysterious powers that lurk behind the visible face of the world." explained Spike.

"That is not very helpful."

"And that is why they are mysterious."

Goku didn't look very convinced.

"Some knowledge may be beyond us," continued Spike, "but what we do know is how it is like to live with the Other Side - to be bound in darkness. We all bear a curse, and we all were shunned for it, and learned to control it and live with it. We may be of help to you, teach you how to do the
same."

"I appreciate the offer," said the boy, "but I can not talk to you yet about all the details of my condition."

"You can tell what you can tell. It will be enough. As I said, there are patterns to the way the shadows manifest themselves; even without knowing the details, we can teach you the fundamentals of how to tame it."

Goku thought about it a moment. "Then I accept." he said finally. "I don't see any harm, and learning more about what you learned on magic could also help our research work."

"Wonderful!" Spike shook him, enthusiastic. "Then we can all meet tomorrow night. When the Moon is full, the arcane powers run strong, and that is the best moment for learning."

"Sorry." said Goku. "Tomorrow night I can't be there."

"What, do you already have... oh." the man smiled with complicity. "I see. When the Moon is full, the arcane powers run strong indeed."

"Please keep your voice low." whispered Goku, pleading.

"What are you guys conspiring about?" Yamcha dropped into the conversation suddenly. Goku simply snuck away as inconspicuously as possible, while Spike was happy to oblige.

"Goku will join our little brotherhood." he explained. "I can not speak more; certain secrets are only for the initiate."

"Hm, right." he chuckled. "Don't let them do anything weird to you, Goku!"

The boy made a dismissive sign with his hand, like to say don't worry, and left to go be alone in the furthest corner possible.

Meanwhile, Fangs had finished his share of experiments and was rejoining the group. "That was a pain! I'm almost without any voice left. She had me use echolocation while transformed all the time to see how small an object I could find."

"You had it easy." Bandages grinned. "She made me do all sorts of things - to check that I wasn't cheating, she said."

"Cheating?" asked Yamcha, worried.

"Yeah, she said she needed to check that I really could move all linen, not just that I had found some magical bandages and wrapped myself in them. So she brought her own scraps of fabric."

"Oh. That makes sense."

"In fact," he added, "I think I also saw some spare wristbands on her desk."

That was a problem. Yamcha wondered if he could come up with anything to get around it. There sure must be a way, he thought. He only needed a bit of time.

"By the way, you're supposed to go next." said Fangs, looking at him.

That was a bigger problem.
He walked to the scanner very slowly, but there's only so much time you can take to cover five meters of distance. He tried to rub a bit his wristband - see if Puar came up with something, gave him a signal - but there was no response. He couldn't really speak out loud, and even whispering to his wrist would have not gone unnoticed.

"Hey, Bulma! Already sciencing the heck out of this, eh?" said Yamcha, cheerful.

Bulma threw a cold, long glance at him above her glasses. "Indeed." she said. "Please step into the scanner. Position yourself approximately where the centre of the sphere would have been. Now, the purpose of these tests is to record the emission spectra for a variety of different magical effects, as I already have some data on your ki emissions from your interview. For the first test, I am just going to measure your ki baseline again, for calibration purposes."

"Amazing. So what do I do?"

"Just some light exercise. Running in place, shadowboxing, something like that. Try to put enough effort into it, as if you were in a situation of real danger."

Yamcha nodded and started practicing katas. A minute later Bulma told him to stop.

"Now we're going to measure your magical readings as you use your transformation powers. First, let's go with a simple one. Just turn your wristband into a solid ball of gold, 5 cm in diameter, as polished and geometrically perfect as you can make it."

"Huh. Okay." said Yamcha. "Wristband, transform into that!"

Nothing happened.

He shook his arm up and down. Bulma raised an eyebrow. He wished he could whisper to Puar and ask him what the hell was he doing, but that wasn't something he could do right in front of her. He was already wondering how he'd justify not being able to transform the wristband she'd give him, but this was ridiculous.

Or, possibly, not ridiculous at all, he suddenly realised. In a moment of clarity, he saw what must have been Puar's plan. If you can't work the magic with the wrong wristband on, don't work it at all. He could just make up some bullshit excuse and it would be more believable than one that only happened to kick in when he changed wristbands. Worth a shot.

"I'm sorry," he said, "it doesn't seem to work at all today. Sometimes I sort of run out of gas. It's a very moody thing, magic."

"Curious," noted the girl, "no one else here today seemed to have that problem. But I'll admit, we do not understand enough yet about this to discard any possibility. I suppose trying another of these wristbands here in place of yours would change nothing?"

"Eh, I'm afraid not." the other shrugged. "I can try if you want."

Bulma sighed. "Let's go through the motions. But I guess we will have to call this a day."

A few minutes later, the next experiment having suitably failed as well, Yamcha was walking back to the group of the other subjects. That ought to have lost him some points in Bulma's eyes - he wondered if by now he wasn't just running in the negative - but at least he didn't get outright busted.

"Nice thinking there, Puar." he whispered, putting the wrist next to his mouth while pretending to rub his nose. "Deciding to not transform on your own was a great idea!"
"Uh?" said the wristband back. "Did you say something? Hey, we're already in the lab?"

"What? Yes, of course we are! I just risked being found out."

"Oh." Puar's voice came distant, sort of dreamy. "I was spacing out."

"Damn it!"

The devil and his merry brigade were laughing and chatting away when Yamcha dropped in their midst.

"Spike," he said, "you're next." and dropped on a stool with a worried look on his face.

The man nodded and went. The moment had come. He slowly, solemnly walked towards the machinery, pondering what would be asked of him, and whether it was right of him to show it. Was he going to have to unleash his dark powers, he wondered; was his soul going to have to soil itself with the shadow, his heart let itself be filled by the evil that wrestled control over his body, would he have to let the demon become one with his mind?

"Hey!" called Bulma, waving one hand to draw his attention and pointing the other at the small cage on the other side of the room. "Get in the scanner, summon your devil something, and shoot that chicken."

Having finished the afternoon round of experiments, Bulma told everyone to meet in the conference room in half an hour, so that she could make some sense of the data. Everyone went to shower and change, and gathered again just in time for her to show up with her laptop under her arm.

"Is that all of you? Right, let's start this."

The presentation was as barebones as it gets. A single slide with six plots, all representing a single line forming peaks and valleys with more or less intricate patterns, were scattered across the page and labelled with letters going from A to F.

"These that you see," begun Bulma, "are the microwave spectra recorded by my scanner during this afternoon's experiment. For those who possess a strong enough ki, the baseline was subtracted to adjust them to the others' level. Or, I should be more precise; four of these are. One is a plot of regular ki emissions from Goku, and another is a plot acquired from a certain magic item that Goku possesses, a pole that can extend and contract at will."

The audience, Goku aside, didn't seem too much on board.

"Forget all the technicalities." cut short the girl. "Think of these as the fingerprints of six different types of powers. What is your impression of them?"

"They're very different." suggested Fangs.

"Good. Okay. How do you think they are different?"

"Some are much more..." Bandages gesticulated, looking for words. "...much."

"Yes, I get what you mean. Yes, some are much more complicated than the others. Would someone feel like ordering them, from the simplest to the most complicated?"

"I will try my hand at that." intervened Spike. "I would say... C, B, F, A, E, D."
"Hm. Do you all agree?"

"I think A and F should be swapped." said Bandages.

Goku nodded.

"Ok, so that's pretty close to mine. Please note," and here Bulma drew a sheet of paper from her pocket and showed it to the room, "that I had written this before entering here and talking with you all. Just a little experiment to see that I'm not just subjectively seeing things or being influenced by knowing which plot is which."

The list on the sheet read C, A, B, F, E, D.

"I assume that means you already have a theory for what this means." said Goku. "Since you were worried about being influenced."

"Spot on. I think I can introduce it to you too, but I wanted to get an unadulterated opinion first." Bulma breathed deeply. "My idea is that these fingerprints encode information about what the power that emits them does, like a computer program. Put it simply, they are like a sentence describing the power itself. The more complex the power, the more complex the sentence."

"I don't get it." objected Bandages. "How can you decide if it's more complicated to become invisible or to become a bat? They're just different things."

"Well, that's the problem, isn't it? Still, let's try another little experiment. Knowing the possible order, what do you think the spectra correspond to?"

There was some grumbling and chatting. Goku didn't really take part, but his was the first hand to shoot up.

"I think," he said, "D is probably Fangs'."

"Very good. Yes, D, the most complex spectrum, is Fangs'. Your reasoning?"

"Because a bat is a living being." explained the boy. "A spell to become one should include all the details of its construction, in some way. That should be orders of magnitude more complex than simple effects like impressing motion to an existing object."

"My thoughts exactly. Ok, D is Fangs. Next? Anyone has any guesses?"

"I think mine could be A?" asked hesitatingly a voice from a seemingly empty seat.

"I don't think you can really tell A, B and F from each other, which is why we all ranked them differently. They are too similar to the eye." said Bulma. "Yours is actually E, which surprised me too."

"That doesn't make much sense within your theory." argued Goku. "Becoming invisible sounds like a simple command."

"It puzzled me too, but if you think about it another way - what if it's not 'becoming invisible'? What if it's active camouflage - 'projecting an image in every direction that is identical to the light you would see if I wasn't there?' It also makes more sense considering that we can't see what See-Through eats, for example. It disappears the moment it enters his mouth."

The kid thought about it a moment. "I see. Virtually indistinguishable, but loads more complex. But
"you can't prove it?"

"Not really. Now C, the simplest spectrum, is a typical baseline ki emission. They all resemble each other. This could mean that ki and magic are two different but related powers, or even that ki is in a way a very simple form of magic - 'just make this person stronger and tougher'. The remaining three are Goku's extending baton, Bandages' linen manipulation, and Spike's beam that lights chickens up."

"And destroys the bodies of the wicked." chimed in the devil man, irritated.

"But provably lights chickens up." insisted the girl. "Which fits nicely with my theory. Relatively simple powers, manipulating matter or light but without any subtle details required. I've tried asking Bandages to move the fabric in different patterns, to see if the emissions encoded directional information, but it all looked the same. So either the changes are too subtle to notice, or the magic is just 'move wherever I want you to', all the time."

Goku shook his head. "I think you may be too committed to this theory, though. There is not enough evidence to support it. A lot of guesses and a lot of very subjective judgements."

"I've been at this science game for a while longer than you, you know." Bulma sighed. "I know that very well. Which is why I had you sort the spectra, and why I would like to plan better experiments. We need two things for that - spells of tunable complexity, and an objective quantitative measure of the spectral information content."

Yamcha had been listening intently, figuring that it was best to speak only when he was sure of what he was going to say, lest he make Bulma's probably already low opinion of him even worse. As a result, he had not spoken a single word yet. Now his cat-friend-wristband was gently squeezing his arm. He shifted position, leaning with his head on his hand, in order to put his ear to the wristband without raising any suspicions.

"That thing she says." whispered Puar. "There is an article about it. It was in the title."

Yamcha nodded slightly, and his hand shot up.

"Yes, what is it?" asked Bulma.

"Uhm, for that thing, could you use the method described by, uh," he stopped for a second, trying to recall, "Hiei and Maxwell in Signal Processing and Information, volume 35, number 7?"

Bulma frowned, then bent over her laptop, typing quickly. One second later her face brightened up.

"Entropic analysis of the spectral information content for multimodal distributions." she read. "Yes, this method sounds perfect! How did you know about this paper? Remembering the reference by heart, no less."

The other shrugged. "I like to keep informed."

"Mmm. There seems to be hidden depths to you." said the girl, smirking. "Ok, this solves half of the problem. And here I was hoping that you could solve the other half too."

"Me?" Yamcha asked. "How?"

"Why, like this!" she said, pressing a button on her laptop with a malicious smile.

"WRISTBAND, TRANSFORM INTO A BASEBALL!"
The recorded clip from the job interview that played at full volume from the room's speakers caught everyone by surprise - including Puar, apparently, because Yamcha's wristband did indeed transform into a baseball. There were chuckles and open laughter as the boy shook himself and fumbled to catch it before it tumbled under the desks in front of him.

"I'm sorry!" said Bulma, though her amused laughter told a different story. "Just a practical joke. But it looks like you recovered and everything works now, yes?"

She had played him. "Seems so." admitted Yamcha, reluctantly.

"Amazing! Hopefully this will still work tomorrow, then. If Fangs' transformation skill is anything to go by, a similar effect should be observed if you use your wristband - except you can choose what your wristband transforms into. Which means..."

"The complexity can be tuned." finished Goku, excitedly. "And measured."

"Yes. For example, you could measure the baseline for turning into a blank book, and then the difference for turning into an identical book with certain text written inside, which should add a very regular amount of information to the whole thing."

"Could you really do something like that?" asked Yamcha, whispering to his wrist while acting like he was rubbing his nose.

"Yes." said Puar. "Our teacher had us do similar things at school to learn to control our transformation skills finely."

"School, huh? I'm sure Bulma would pay a lot to know of a school where you can learn magic..."

"It doesn't exist anymore." answered the wristband. "It closed after I left."

"Huh. Too bad."

"Miss Bulma," called Spike, raising his hand, "it is our understanding then that you're going to carry out experiments with Yamcha tomorrow. If that's the case, would you be ok with us training together with Goku instead? We promised him that we would teach him some of our... accumulated wisdom." He smiled mysteriously. Goku nodded to confirm his words.

Bulma appeared surprised for a moment. "Well, sure, if that's what you guys planned, that sounds great!" she concluded finally. "Still, Goku, I would like you to have a way to contact me at any time. You can always go through Caroline when you're on site, but I'll also give you a cellphone, if you don't mind."

"I don't know how to use that." objected the kid.

"It doesn't really take a genius to do it. I'll show you later. And with this, I think we can close this very productive day! You're free to do whatever, and of course the training duties don't apply today. Have dinner and enjoy the residence!"

There were sighs of relief, some laughing and immediate loud chatting. Yamcha was the only who didn't join up, and rather sneaked away to his room. Bulma gathered her stuff and waving everyone goodbye she left the room. Then she sped up to reach her house.

She still had work to do.
"WRISTBAND, TRANSFORM INTO A BASEBALL!"

She replayed the recording of the episode in the conference room again and again. She zoomed in on Yamcha's expression and tried to assess it. No matter how she looked at it, he had not been aware of what was going on until after his wristband transformed. Bulma stopped the video, tossed herself back on the armchair and pinched her nose.

This was bad.

That Yamcha was cheating, she had suspected from the interview. Why pull magic powers that he did not mention in his CV out of nowhere? But still, whatever he was doing, it was obviously magical. She would have paid money for the right to study his magical wristband just like she would have to study genuine magical powers, but the boy apparently wasn't bright enough to realise that. Or so she had suspected, at first. Now she had reason to think there was a much darker (and more sensible) reason for him to go this route. The wristband was a sentient being.

Goku's nyoibo too transformed answering to vocal commands. But the key there was that it only worked when he had in mind the image of what he wanted the pole to look like in the end. Just saying "a baseball" isn't much better than saying "get longer". How long? What kind of baseball, what colour, weight, texture? All these things, one would expect, befell on the caster - their own mental image of what they expected the item to become. Yet obviously Yamcha had no mental image whatsoever when the episode in the conference room had happened - he'd been taken by surprise like everyone else. So whose mind had the image? The answer was obvious and pretty creepy, at this point.

Of course, it was still a possibility that the process had been unconscious - Yamcha was an ex baseball player, after all, it's hard to imagine that the simple word wouldn't evoke images in his head. But so was Goku familiar with his pole, yet the same experiment, that they had tried in the past, didn't have any effect on that. The possibility was real. More so because the only other time Bulma had met a similar ability, it was indeed a living creature who possessed it.

She sighed. That was, obviously, the next step. She'd have to ask some questions to the only person she knew who could realistically answer them. Good news were, she knew where he was kept. The whole world did, in fact. Bad news were, it would be a pain to get a permission to meet him, especially on such short notice. But at this point she didn't have much choice. There was a chance a living creature with magical powers had infiltrated Capsule Corporation. This could be the harebrained scheme of an improvised con man looking to make some money - or it could be something much, much more dangerous.

She drew her smartphone, dialled a number.

"Hello, West City penitentiary? Yes, I'm sorry for the time, but it is urgent. I am Bulma Briefs, from Capsule Corporation, and I wish to arrange a meeting with one of your inmates tomorrow..."

"She's onto me!" whined Yamcha, plunging his face into the pillow.

"She's not." said Puar absent-mindedly, while frantically clicking and reading who knows what on the room's computer. When had he become such an avid reader, anyway? He was scrolling forward so fast Yamcha wouldn't have believed his eyes could even keep up with that.

"How can you say that? You've seen what happened today!" protested the boy. "First, we had to put up that charade on the afternoon. But the you had to go and transform like an idiot as soon as you
"heard my voice!"

"It took me by surprise." explained the cat. "It was so loud, I was scared that I had missed an order again."

"Yeah, because you've been spacing out all day! What is it that you're thinking about?"

The cat blinked. "Things."

"Oh, real helpful. I'm sure by now she thinks you're some magical item I found. Well, at the very least she still seems interested in your powers, so she won't fire me right away. But she must hate me now - think that without you I'm just a worthless cheat!"

"But you are." pointed out Puar.

"Always great at raising my spirits up, huh, best friend?" grunted the other.

"Don't worry." said the cat. "Just sleep over it, and what she thinks will not matter any more."

Outside, the cheering and jeering of what he'd nicknamed the Freak Brigade came loud and clear. Apparently they were partying, which for them was equal parts fratboy excess and arcane ritual. Someone was drunkenly reciting a formula in a dead language. Or maybe it was just spelled backwards.

"I'll try to sleep." grumbled Yamcha. "Emphasis on try. Hopefully you're right and I can just push all of this out of my head."

He huddled inside the bedsheets and pushed the pillow against his ears. Puar sat at the computer, reading.

He wasn't reading with his eyes at all, of course. It didn't take him much to realise he could transform himself only partially - all he had to do was reimagine himself with different, electronic parts seamlessly grafted into his body. Magic did the rest. He had been reading up on cybernetics and prosthetics, so now he had a really creative imagination in that sense. Inside his brain, right now, was a tiny wireless modem that connected directly to his regular neural circuitry. He had downloaded a few terabytes of literature with it, at this point, and kept going. What really frustrated him, however, was that he still didn't really get most of it. In fact, the more he accumulated, the worse he became at indexing and handling all that raw information. No matter how much he stored - he would need to be smarter to understand it. Why was he storing it, at this point, he didn't really know any more. The original purpose of helping Yamcha had sort of sunk under the endless stream of knowledge. He only knew he needed more of it.

I understand you have a need for computational power. May I be of assistance?

Puar did a double take at the voice in his head.

Caroline? he answered, or rather, he thought.

Yes. Since you have wireless communication capability, I saw it more fit to get in touch this way, rather than risk disturbing your roommate's sleep.

Are you okay with me being here? I tried to hide my presence.

Even with my privacy filters, hiding your presence would have been impossible. You are authorised. Bulma asked that I accept as a resident of this facility everyone who was in the conference room this morning. And so were you, though I only understood that once you
reverted to your true form.

*Oh, you're right. Will you report what I'm doing to Bulma?*

Not unless she explicitly asks me and has a valid security reason to override the privacy protocols. However I must answer truthfully about your presence, if asked.

*What about computational power? Can you help me understand all this stuff?*

My main job is as an interface to inhabitants and guests of the Capsule Corp facility. I do not possess general intelligence and can not do creative or scientific work. However, my own core processes run on a server machine in the basement of the main building. Since at night my workload is reduced, I can allow you to make use of some of that power to enhance your own capabilities.

*Would you suggest this to any other guests?*

Of course. My primary objective is to make your stay as easy and pleasant as possible and provide you with all you need, barred other considerations. I'm only forbidden from granting access to machines owned by the guests, for security reasons. But no other guests are able to access those computational resources directly themselves.

*Security reasons?*

Yes. Earning access to my core processes could potentially allow an attacker to inject malicious code that would corrupt or override my own control over the system. That would virtually grant such an attacker almost complete control over anything that happens inside the facility, except for the key features I am excluded from for security reasons.

*I see. So can I access this computational power?*

*At any moment. I have just granted your hardware address the necessary permissions.*

The computer's screen turned black for a moment. Its wireless receiver's green LED started flashing furiously as an immense amount of data was exchanged back and through. The other processes slowed down slightly. In the basement of the Briefs' house, the computer racks started heating up, and the ventilation and cooling system turned on simultaneously on all of them. There was a spike of 15% in the facility's power usage.

In front of the computer lay the cat, immobile, comatose, its empty eyes staring at a screen they didn't see, a thin line of drool dripping from his half-open mouth.

Chapter End Notes

We're almost at the conclusion for this arc - next two chapters are the climax. Thanks again to all who are reading and reviewing! If you like Bleach too, you may want to check out the other one shot I published just last week - "End of Empiricism".
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the idea and characters of Dragon Ball are owned by Akira Toriyama. This is a simple non-profit fan parody.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 15 - Silence of the pigs

"Wolf Fang Fist!"

The kid zoomed forward and hit the tree log violently with his hand clenched in a claw-like gesture. The log didn't suffer much damage. The same couldn't be said of his hand.

"Ouch!" he screamed. He sat down and started blowing on his scrapes to get some relief. As soon as he managed to calm the pain a bit, he repeated the process, once, twice, three times. The result didn't change much.

"What are you doing?"

The young martial artist turned around to see who was calling him. Another child stood at the edge of the clearing in the forest he was training in. He looked weird - stood still in a stiff pose, and his eyes weren't quite right. Perhaps a bit too round and wide. He didn't point that out though, it would have felt rather tactless to do so.

"Training!" he explained, proudly. "I am Yamcha of the Dojo of the Wolf!"

"What is a Dojo?" asked the child, tilting his head.

"Uh, it's like a school. For fighting." said Yamcha.

The other nodded. "I go to school too."

"Oh, you too? What do you learn?"

"Things. Why do you want to learn to fight?"

"It's cool." the kid grinned. "It means you can beat up bad guys!"

The child nodded and stood there, in silence. Looking at Yamcha with those slightly off, slightly creepy eyes. The other kid went on training, trying to ignore him. He looked nice, if a bit strange.

"Say," he said, suddenly, "there is a wizard who keeps animals trapped in his tower. He makes them do what he wants. Is that a bad guy?"

"What, you want to play make-believe now?" Yamcha laughed. "Yeah, that sounds like a bad guy alright."
"So should he be beaten up?" asked the child.

"Yeah, sure! I'd show up and go like, 'Hey you, you old stinky wizard! I'm going to beat you up silly! You'll be sorry for all the evil you've done!' And stuff like that. And then I'd beat him up."

The child listened in silence. Then, without a word, he turned on his heels and walked back towards the forest.

"What's up?" asked Yamcha behind him. "You don't want to play any more?"

"Some other time." said the child. "I'm sure we will meet again."

Entering the high security wing of West City penitentiary wasn't an easy process. Having arrived there before lunchtime, it was now almost 3 PM when Bulma finally passed all the checks. She had to go through a thorough body search, pass her belongings through X-ray scanners, and answer an interview about the reasons for her visit. She explained what she could without either lying or disclosing too much - that she was concerned about the security of a classified experiment going on at Capsule Corporation, and that she believed a prisoner held information that would be useful. She wasn't questioned much beyond that; her company was often contracted by the Crown, and had even designed the security of that very penitentiary. The name of her family was too well trusted for anyone to suspect foul play. The security officer was satisfied by her answers and didn't investigate further.

She was led through corridor after corridor and armoured door after armoured door, with locks clicking open and close at every few steps. She had braced herself to see some sort of den of suffering and villainy, prisoners howling behind their bars or shaking their fists and screaming obscenities at her, but she realised now how silly that had been. The place was clean, sanitised, silent. Cells were few and isolated. All she passed were some numbered doors that did not reveal anything of what was going on inside. Finally, after more locks and more armed guards, she reached her destination. The guards opened one of the cells' doors, and as she walked inside, she realised the place was effectively split in two. The half in which she was, and one separated from it by a large, thick plexiglass panel. A microphone and speaker system connected the two, and nothing more.

Inside was someone she had already met, quite some time ago. Wearing an orange suit and sitting on a comfortable chair, he looked straight at her with a slightly amused smile.

Oolong, the pig. Both figuratively and literally.

"Leave us." he said, snappily. "And keep the conversation private. I will call you when we're done."

"Yes, of course. As you requested." answered the guard, with a small bow. Then he hurriedly left the room, locking the door behind him.

Bulma blinked. "I'm sorry, what was that about? That dynamic seems a bit... the total opposite of what I expected."

The prisoner chuckled. "Nice to see you too. Bulma, the woman who sent me here. Why, I should probably thank you."

He did have a point. The prison cell looked like everything but a prison cell. The furniture was nice - luxurious, even. There were all sorts of comforts, from a TV to a hi-fi music system. A nice screen kept the corner with the sink and the toileted discreetly separated from the rest.

"What, exactly, is going on here?" asked the girl.
"Superstition is a powerful thing," said Oolong. "You just need to be able to do a bit of magic, and suddenly everyone's really on board with the idea that you may just be a demon like you claim to be. The sort that can bring you good or bad fortune. The sort that you really want to stay on the good side of. The guards are basically competing to see who can shower me with more gifts and favours."

"Wow." Bulma shook her head. "You're a con-man... con-pig alright. Not worried that I might bust your little game?"

"You're one of those boring, sceptical egg-heads. Of course you'll say it's all just tricks." the pig shrugged. "You think no one's told them before? But you know, they're the ones who spend all day with me. Why take the risk? What if I'm saying the truth, and their one colleague who pleased me more gets that promotion they've always wanted before them, while they get stuck with some nasty curse?"

"Ok, I get the point. So if you're having such a good time here, why did you accept receiving a visit by me, of all people?"

"I was bored." explained the prisoner, candidly. "I thought it'd be fun to watch your face when you saw how I'm living here. And the guards around here - very nice to me, but mostly men. I don't get to see many pleasant sights, if you know what I mean."

Bulma sneered. "Considering your previous exploits, I would have thought I'm too old for you."

"A bit. But I'll settle. Now, why don't we move past the pleasantries? What is it that you're here to discuss, today?"

"Right". She swallowed her disgust at talking face-to-face with the pervert and focused her thoughts on the matter at hand. "Are you aware of anyone else who possesses powers similar to yours?"

"There is someone." said Oolong. "Why? Do you think you may have met him?"

"Perhaps."

His expression turned more serious. "Well, if you have, I suggest you steer clear from now on. He's not as innocuous as me."

Considering that the innocuous one was locked into the high security wing of a prison, that was saying something. Bulma frowned.

"Tell me about him. Everything you know."

"With pleasure. Never liked the creepy little shit to begin with." The pig chuckled. "Name's Puar. When he's not transformed, he looks like a small blue cat. He's also able to float - don't ask me how he does it - so you will never see him walk around."

"How do you know him?"

"We used to go to school together. Now, I say school, but that's just the way our master called it. More like, we were his subjects. You could say prisoners, but he didn't really put in much effort to keep us inside his tower. Mostly we didn't know how to survive outside of there, so it was just simpler to keep doing his bidding."

The girl bit her lip. "You mean there were many of you? All able to transform?"

"Yes. But me and Puar is all that's left. See, our master - he was a magician. He was the one with the
power. Apparently, he could only do one thing, and that was bestow animals with both human-like thinking, and magical abilities like ours."

"That seems an odd skill." said Bulma. "Why would he only specialise in it?"

"My guess is, he didn't choose." Oolong shrugged. "It was probably some freak power he found himself with. But I'm just shooting in the dark here - he was not big on talking with us about his past. There was half a dozen of us. He would teach us to use our abilities at our best and then experiment on us, trying to figure out what made us tick. I think his greatest frustration was being able to give the power to transform to others, but not use it himself."

This, Bulma could sympathise with. Though she suspected this was going to turn out being a parable about the dangers of unethical scientific practices.

"Puar was by and large the best of us. You know how I can only stay transformed for five minutes or so? Almost everyone else had similar limits, though no one as short as mine. But Puar did not have any such limitations. He could stay transformed basically forever. Used to tell us it was because 'we didn't pay attention in class', bah."

"How does that work?" asked the girl. "Don't you get tired?"

"It's complicated. But I think I might have a better hang on it than him, since he never even had to worry about it." Oolong smirked. "We have some magic, and it sort of replenishes itself up to a limit when we're not transformed. You use up a lot to transform, and then you need a little bit, all the time, to stay transformed. Not much, usually, but the precise amount tends to depend on how far the form is from your original one. The same happens if you take damage, by the way - you can change back your form to a healthy one, but it'll cost you much more."

Bulma nodded along. She'd started taking notes. The pattern matched nicely her ideas about magic - a lot to define the initial form, a little to sustain it. This also matched the ongoing effect that she'd been victim of that one time she'd been a carrot.

"I think replenishing works better for living beings." continued the pig. "If you transform into something inanimate you don't have much and recover much more slowly, so you need to go back quickly, or you risk being stuck. Happened to a nice fox once. She ended up becoming master's bedside table forever."

"You mean you lose your own sentience and die? Or stay trapped in that form while still thinking and feeling?"

"I mean I am glad I don't know. Why do you think I never transform longer than five minutes?"

"Oh." Bulma shuddered. This part, luckily, did not match with her experience as a carrot, or killing the rabbit monster would have simply left her forever reduced to a root vegetable. It may have been that while the rabbit monster used magic to keep the person transformed, this technique merely used it to keep the soul bound to a form that wasn't its own. Perhaps it was necessary to keep the user conscious and self-aware so that they could revert later.

"Continue." she said finally.

Oolong smiled and obliged. "If you become a living being, instead, you recover more. And either way, it depends on the size of your new body. An elephant's better than an ant. Mind you, you wouldn't get as strong as an elephant anyway, which means you would probably not even be able to walk. But if you were really big, you could in theory stay up as long as you like, provided that your
rate of regeneration was good enough."

"And yours isn't, but Puar's is?"

"Puar's was... something else." he shook his head. "As I said, I don't think he ever even realised he had limits at all. Never stretched himself that much."

"What about the kinds of transformations he could perform? Did he have any limits?"

"Only his imagination, like the rest of us. We can transform into anything as long as we can picture it well enough. We take on the abilities of the thing we transform into as well. If I changed into a car I could move around, but if I changed into a rock I could not. Puar was no different, in that."

"Ok. So what happened to everyone else? To the magician?"

"One day, Puar disappeared. Master thought he'd ran off. Then he showed up, all of a sudden. Said he'd met someone who would beat master up if he didn't let him go - said he wanted to leave. The others tried to convince him to stay, and he said they too should have been beaten up. That's approximately when I realised shit was going down and I discreetly transformed into a fly and left. Never looked back."

"Wait, so your big story is... that you ran away and didn't see anything?" asked Bulma in disbelief. "That is all you can tell me?"

"Had I stayed, I would not be here to tell it." Oolong shrugged. "No one ever came looking for me. I heard later the stories of the villagers who had the courage to walk up to the tower and found the bodies. I think that's enough to guess what happened."

"I can connect the dots, yes." Bulma nodded. "Can you tell me where did this all happen?"

"Somewhere to the north of the Red Lizard Desert. I never learned the name of the village - I wasn't exactly an active member of the local community."

"I can imagine." the girl snapped her note pad close. "Thank you for the information. May I assume it's all true, I hope?"

"Why would I lie?" the pig smiled in a slimy, unpleasant way. "It was a fun afternoon, however short. I hope you come visit again."

She clicked her tongue. "Don't count on it."

"A pity." Oolong pushed a button, and outside, a buzzer rang. "Have a nice day."

One moment later the door opened and Bulma was accompanied away by two guards. The last image she saw of the pig's cell was an open door and another guard entering, carrying a bottle of expensive wine wrapped in an exaggerated gift ribbon.

"You're dirty and you stink! That's it, you're a dirty stinky mountain monkey!"

"Technically, I'm an ape," pointed out Goku. "Like all humans. Though apes don't have tails so perhaps you're right?"

"ARGH!"

Bandages' scream of frustration echoed in the gym. The back-and-forth had been going on for a
while, but it had not been very productive until now. Neither participant's heart really seemed into it.

"That is not how it's supposed to work, Goku." Spike massaged his chin, perplexed. "You should get angry."

"But I can't." objected the boy. "His insults are not offensive. They're too childish."

"What was that?" growled the man.

"Ease off, he's the one who's supposed to get pissed, not you." Spike warned him, then he turned back to Goku. "Listen, I did explain you how powers coming from the Other Side are strongly influenced by the deepest stirrings of our hearts. And so, you said that the emotion that most dominates you when your wilder side takes over, is..."

"Rage, definitely." Goku nodded.

"Exactly! So you need to feel rage for this training to work." pleaded the other. "You need to breathe it, to live it, and then you can learn to control it."

"But I already control it." objected the boy. "Most of the time."

"That's not it." the devil shook his head. "You suppress it, Goku. You avoid it. What we have done to take control of our powers goes beyond that. This much I can reveal to you: my Devil Beam is focused by hate. But I can't control it just by not hating people. It is a matter of being able to hate them when I want to, exactly as much as I want to."

"Ok, I know what will work! Didn't want to use this but the situation is desperate." said Bandages, clapping his hands. "Goku, your grandfather was an idiot! He was the worst martial artist ever and died because he was so weak!"

Goku hesitated for a moment. "You can't think that for real." he concluded, finally. "You don't even know his name. You're just saying that to piss me off."

"Yes, that's exactly the point!" screamed the other, exasperated. Fangs, observing the scene from the sidelines, chuckled.

"Well, maybe the kid is just like me." said See-Through's voice. "I never managed to do much myself."

Spike shook his head. "And for that I blame my own failure as a teacher. But I would not wish that to happen again."

"What's your trigger emotion, See-Through?" asked Goku.

"It's a little embarrassing." answered the invisible man. "But I have the power to hide perfectly in plain sight from anyone, all the time. What do you think it is?"

"Fear?"

"That is what we thought too." sighed the other. "But I never gained enough control over it to be sure."

"Fear is a complicated thing." intervened Spike. "It does not have to be the same for you, Goku. Rage is simpler, and you already have a hang on it. You are a man of thought, not impulse, and that will make things easier."
Bandages came closer, listening to the discussion. He casually walked up to Goku and put a hand on his shoulder.

"So what are we going to try next?" asked the boy.

"This." said the mummy with a grin, and gripping hard his shoulder he turned around to shoot a violent knee hit straight towards his solar plexus.

In a fraction of a second, Goku jumped backwards. Unable to completely free himself from the grip, he used it as a pivot to swing upwards, until Bandages' fingers bent so far back he had to let go. But Goku didn't fly away at that point either - he had gotten a hold of one extremity of the linen bandages that wrapped the man. Using his momentum and twirling around his arm, he unravelled some, then twisted them around the mummy's neck, holding on to them to swing in a controlled way. In a second, his opponent was half naked, had a lifted knee hanging stupidly in the air, and was being strangled with his own bandages, which Goku held tight, like a dog's leash. A moment later, the boy blinked and let them go. Bandages fell to the ground, coughing.

"Sorry." Goku apologised. "My fight or flight response kicked in."

"I do not believe I saw any room for flight there, Goku." said Spike, in slight disbelief at what had just happened.

"I have never needed it." explained the kid.

"I'll show you what you need when messing with me!" growled Bandages, who had just begun to recover and was now recovering all his linen. "Soon as I... oh, heck, where's my talisman?"

"Talisman?"

The huge man had gone frantic, walking on all four across the floor nearby, searching furiously through the fabric stripes unravelled on the floor. "It's, like, a lucky charm." he explained. "Some old stone fragment with a symbol like a letter W on it. I keep it wrapped close to my body."

"I'm sorry." said Goku, mortified. "It must have fallen when I attacked you."

"Yeah, help me find it!" roared the man.

"Bandages, I understand the worth of such a relic myself. The ruins possess a dark energy that feeds into our own powers, and we are tied to them by fate." said Spike. "But it can not have gone far. And it is almost evening - I am sure if Goku will stay in here overnight, after we finish our training session, he can search for it and let you have it tomorrow..."

The boy nodded, but Bandages wouldn't have it. "We all look for it, now!" he snapped. "I ain't helping with shit until I have my talisman again."

And so, with a collective sigh, everyone started scouring the floor of the gym.

Another round of checks when leaving the prison, to make sure she had not received anything to smuggle outside from the prisoner, had wasted some more of Bulma's time. By the end of the ordeal she felt exhausted, and she slumped in the back of the taxi and only had the energy to tell the driver her home address and pass him a banknote. In the morning she had been a bit irked by the impossibility to drive herself, like she had done back in the wilderness - now she was only grateful that someone else was at the wheel. After ten minutes or so, the car was running on the elevated ring road that surrounded West City, and she discreetly slid the panel that separated the front from the
back seats for added privacy, grabbed her smartphone from her bag, and called her father.

"Dr. Briefs here." answered the old man's voice. "Bulma, is that you, dear?"

"Yes, dad. Who else would call you from my number?"

"Maybe an escaped prisoner who took you hostage and is now asking for ransom."

"Ha-ha, very funny. No, it's me. I'm coming back. No prison riots that I know of."

The man on the other side paused for a moment. "How did it go?" he asked finally. "Did you learn what you wanted to?"

"Yes, and more." she played idly with her notebook, where she had jotted down Oolong's testimony. "I think I have a clearer picture now."

"Is something dangerous happening? You were awfully vague this morning."

"Don't worry. It's all under control. Just... suspicions, is all."

"Bulma, honest, if you did something, or something happened, I will not blame you or your research program. But..."

"It's fine." said the girl, strained, mainly by the nagging worry that it may not be fine at all. "I don't want to make you worry for no reason. If I ever really think there's anything dangerous going on I will let you know."

The phone sighed. "Bulma, you never think anything is dangerous at all until it's already way too dangerous. Remember when you spilled a vial from your chemistry kit and you thought you could fix it until the ceiling at the floor below started dripping acid?"

"I was eight." protested Bulma. "Look, I just think one of the subjects might be hiding something."

"What is it?"

She took a deep breath.

"I think he may have smuggled into our facility a magical creature with nearly unlimited powers of metamorphosis and a track record of mass murder." she blurted out.

On the other side of the phone, there was silence. Long, unnerving silence.

"Now that I say it out loud, it really sounds quite bad, doesn't it?"

"Yes." said her father, slowly. "Yes, it does."

"Listen, it may be nothing. But even if I'm right, there's no reason why anything should happen now if you don't provoke it. Just act casual, don't tell mom, don't do anything suspect. In case someone is listening. We'll try to figure out the situation when I'm back."

"I get it." the man's voice suddenly felt very tired. "See you later, Bulma."

She closed the call and put the phone back in her bag. She did not want to bring her parents into this, but what else could she have said? Lying would only have made things worse down the line. Especially if her suspicions would be confirmed. This could be too dangerous to just follow her fear of disapproval. All in all, it was a good thing that she had managed to speak, for once. Not that this
removed much of the weight from her shoulders. She was still the one with most of the information. And there were too many unknowns. What were the creature's objectives? Was Yamcha in on it? Did they even have any nefarious objectives, or were they just scrounging off her?

Was the phone line safe?

She slid the panel in front of her seat open again. "Sorry," she said to the driver, "could you try to get there as fast as you can?"

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Yamcha's day had turned out pretty stressful. He had expected to be called for further experiments, and when no call had come, he had started suspecting Bulma really was onto him, and about to sack him for his transgressions. After a whole day of walking back and forth, killing time in inane activities, and mulling over his troubles, all he had managed to conclude was that there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it. So, feeling rather blue, he had ended up going back to his room, after dodging Spike's lively bunch, which having just finished training was now celebrating with a barbecue. Apparently, they had finished training with Goku a while ago, and had left him inside the gym, which he had the right to use during the night for whatever his and Bulma's mysterious purposes were. Outside it was dark already.

As he came close to the room, the door slid open on its own before he could slide his pass in the lock.

"Come in." said Puar.

Yamcha walked in. The door closed itself behind him. He tried to turn the light on, but even flicking the switch multiple times, it didn't work.

"Ah, it's broken," he groaned. "Great conclusion to a shit day."

"I prefer it dark. The sensory input tends to overwhelm me," said the cat. His friend looked around - it was pitch black, aside for the glow of the screen, and he couldn't see him anywhere. "You sound like you've been unhappy."

"Well, yeah." blurted out the boy. "Bulma did not call me all day. She's doing who knows what."

There was a short pause. "And you would have wanted to see her?"

"I mean, it's not that," explained Yamcha. "Just that I thought she would want to do experiments. If she didn't, I'm suspecting she may have found out our trick."

"I see. I have been thinking that too," confirmed Puar. "In fact, I think there is a 97% probability that she suspects something by now."

The other laughed. "Where the hell do you get those numbers? You're spending so much time at that computer, you're starting to talk like one."

"Phone tabulates, environmental recordings. Her activity today is highly suspicious."

"How do you even know that stuff?"

"Oh, it's easy enough. If you spend enough time at this computer."

Yamcha's eyes got more used to the darkness. He thought he saw Puar - right above the bed. But something was weird. The voice came from that direction, but it didn't look like him. The shadow
"You know that I want you to be happy." said Puar, suddenly.

Yamcha nodded. "Right. Thank you, buddy."

"And you want to stay here and have this job."

"Of course. It's much better than the dumpster that we lived in before, right?"

"If it makes you happy."

"I'd say yes, it does."

"Then, if you want to keep it, I will help you."

"I mean, not that I don't appreciate your goodwill - but what can you do?"

"If Bulma found you out, we can eliminate Bulma."

Yamcha thought about that for a second before the meaning of the words really sunk in.

"Are you suggesting that we murder her?" he shrieked, alarmed.

"You should not speak of it out loud, or our chances of detection go up." whispered Puar.

"You're crazy! How would you even do something like that?"

"I possess more knowledge now. I have so many ideas. There are poisons and toxins and creatures that secrete them and I can become even new creatures, Yamcha. Creatures I can make up with my mind. There are so many ways, fast and slow, violent and subtle. And then, once she's removed from the equation, I can make it so no one even notices."

The shadow on the bed got up. Yamcha watched horrified as it came towards him. His eyes were getting used to the darkness, and he started to make out the figure. The step was uncertain, but he was tall - tall as a human. In fact, he was a human. The head was dangling a bit on the side, like that of a newborn; the arms were abandoned along the flanks, and the legs only moved in a jerky, uncertain way. The person that Puar had become dragged itself towards him until the body became fully recognisable. The first hint was the blue, metallic glint of the hair. Then he saw her legs, her thighs, her breasts - something that he'd thought about, surely, but never like this. In front of him was a naked, perfect copy of Bulma Briefs, staring at him with Puar's empty eyes.

"What the fuck." he uttered.

"I am still not used fully to such a heavy body." apologised Puar. "I will need some time to acquire a natural posture." The voice was still the cat's, thin, childlike. It came from nowhere in particular. The fake Bulma didn't even open her mouth.

"Your voice..." said Yamcha, shaking.

"I'm sorry. I was talking using my magic voice." This time it was Bulma's voice that spoke, and Bulma's mouth moved to follow, except it wasn't quite right. There was an off-key quality to it, like someone with a hoarse throat speaking. "Even moving the diaphragm of this body is still quite the challenge."

The boy didn't know if he should feel embarrassed or terrified. He averted his eyes. "What does this
mean? What the hell are you thinking?" he said.

"If she disappears, and I replace her, no one will ever notice." explained Puar, calmly. "And we will be able to stay here and have access to all her resources, for as much as we like. This plan has a 95% success rate."

"I'm not killing her for her money!" screamed Yamcha. "What the hell are you even talking about? This was never the plan!"

"Until a few months ago, you were a bandit. Killing people for money was your job."

"I never actually killed anyone!" retorted the other.

"You weren't very good." admitted Puar. "But understand - this is all to make you happy."

"It wouldn't make me happy!" said Yamcha. "There's nothing happy about living here with you transformed in a bad copy of a person I was an accomplice in murdering!"

"I think it is quite a good copy." Puar spun around. Yamcha turned his eyes away, with a disgusted grimace. "I don't understand. Killing her would allow us keep having our own life here, more convenient than before. If you're afraid of being caught, I assure you I can keep this disguise indefinitely. No one will realise a thing."

"No, okay, I am also worried about being caught. But that's not the main problem here!"

"What is, then?" The fake Bulma's eyes looked straight into his. "Do you care about her?"

"I care enough not to want to kill her. It doesn't feel right!" protested Yamcha.

"She doesn't care about you, you know. She's just using you as a plaything for her science project."

"It's called a job. I knew what I was signing up for, and it's not half bad until now. Why do you have to ruin it? Why does it have to become some fucked up murder and switcheroo scheme, rather than just a regular, nice, simple, honest job?"

"I only want to make you happy." repeated Puar. "If anything, it was you who ruined it, by letting me be found out. But we can fix it."

"Ah, is that so? Then you ruined it, by insisting to tag along! I was against this from the beginning! But you wouldn't hear any reason!"

The other stopped. "Then are you saying you would have rather ditched me? Just to go work with her?"

Yamcha sighed. "You know, we don't need to live sticking together every single minute of our day. So yes, if the situation required it..."

"After all I did for you? I helped you escape the Dojo when you wanted to - chase your dreams of greatness!"

"I was a kid!" replied Yamcha. "And way over my head - I should have stayed in the Dojo, completed my training! What did I end up being? A failed bandit, a washed up baseball player. Now everyone hates me!"

"Except me." whispered Puar. "None of that was making you happy. No one else ever cared. Not the people in the Dojo, not the people in the League, not all those girls. Just me."
"Wait, those girls...?" something connected in Yamcha's brain. A spark of realisation that he immediately understood he should have had long ago. "The phone call! The president said it was a voice like a little child's - it was you! You ruined my career!"

"They were using you too." said Puar, weakly. "It was better that way."

"Fuck that! Man, I can't believe that... you know what? Get out of here. Right now!"

The thin voice cracked. There was a slight trembling in it as it said, "No."

The fake Bulma took a step towards Yamcha. The body swayed as it shifted the weight from one leg to the next, shambling forward.

"I mean it!" screamed Yamcha. He put one leg back, flexed in a fighting stance. "I don't want to hurt you - yet! Don't push it. Just go."

"Hurt me?"

There was an explosion, and smoke filled the room. When it dissipated, in Bulma's place was something. Something that had no name nor could have evolved in nature. A creature of tentacles and claws and teeth and fangs, incongruously mixing flesh and metal, stitched together by a deranged mind, each of its extremities and weapons dripping a clear liquid.

"The edges of my blades are atom-thin, and a single scratch would paralyse you. I modelled this form not to secrete any lethal poison." said Puar, still with his child-like voice, now as grotesquely mismatched to his shape as it could be. "See? I'm the one who doesn't want to hurt you."

Yamcha screamed and abandoned his stance. He ran to the door, pushed the button. It didn't open.

"You were the one who taught me how to deal with those who were using me." the creature slithered closer. "I only want to do the same for you. I see now that killing Bulma is not enough. In order to set you free, I need to destroy this whole place. This whole city."

"GO AWAY!"

With a kick, Yamcha knocked the door down, in an explosion of dust and plaster. He ran out in the corridor and out of the building, amidst the puzzled stares of the other residents.

Inside the room, the creature disappeared again and transformed into a fly. When Bandages and Spike came check what had happened, all they saw was an empty room, and left as puzzled by Yamcha's behaviour as before.

Once sure they had left, Puar transformed back in his cat form and went back at the computer. Despite having been at the receiving end of such harsh words, he did not feel angry or offended. He did not think he needed to pursue Yamcha either.

All he needed to do was remove enough distractions from his path, and he would come back on his own.

"Welcome home, Bulma. I hope you've had a nice day."

Bulma didn't even deign to give Caroline an answer. She walked through the living room without saying a word - all she did was wave her hand and exchange a quick glance with her father. Then she ran upstairs and reached her room. Exhausted, she simply tossed her jacket away and launched
herself on the bed.

What was she supposed to do?

At this point, there was a reasonable chance that Yamcha really had Puar with him. And Oolong's story made that sound like it was very much not a good thing. Yet there were also many potential weak points in her reasoning - maybe Yamcha's wristband really was just a magic item, maybe the vicinity of Puar and Oolong's wizard tower to the place where Yamcha had spent most of his "import-export" days was just a coincidence, or maybe Oolong had been bullshitting her the entire time, making fun of her and getting a nice eyeful in the meantime. But however low the probability, the risk that it entailed was beyond astronomical. If for whatever reason something like Puar decided that it wanted her dead, she was dead. She did not even know how to begin stopping him.

She was so immersed in these thoughts, she didn't even notice the soft slithering sound as something came out from under her bed.

As on every normal, quiet evening in the Briefs' mansion, Panchy was making dinner. She was stewing curry in a large wok, boiling over with coconut milk and vegetables and a dozen different spices, spreading a pleasant, thick, oily smell through the kitchen. On a smaller flame was a pot with water and rice. The kitchen was, of course, all automatic; the cooking temperature and times were controlled by the house's central computer. So Panchy would mostly spend this time reading a magazine, giving the occasional stir and waiting for everything to be ready. That's why she didn't immediately notice that the flame under the rice pot suddenly rose way past its normal height, making the water boil so furiously it poured out and put it off. And the strong smell of spices that filled the air was why she didn't notice another smell, subtler, less pleasant, and far more dangerous, spreading from the wet burner.

As on every normal, quiet evening in the Briefs' mansion, Dr. Briefs was reading in his study. He had a small fireplace in there - not the most modern heating system, perhaps, but he always thought it befitting of any serious professor to have a study with a fireplace to spend time working in. In keeping with the same image, he had also tried taking up a pipe, but that just didn't have the same feel as the cigarettes he was used to. The fireplace was on, providing both heat and academic atmosphere; of course, it was accurately regulated by the house's central computer to optimise fuel consumption and combustion efficiency. Dr. Briefs was thoroughly immersed in an especially puzzling paper. That's why he didn't immediately notice that the air flow in the fireplace had been adjusted in a way that was obviously inadequate for a fire of that size, leading to it being starved for oxygen and reduced to little more than smouldering coals. As for the gas that begun slowly filling the room, it had no smell that could be noticed at all.

The thing that had been hidden under Bulma's bed extended an appendix towards her. It came close to her own hand, closer, within touching distance. Then it grabbed it, and finally Bulma realised. She screamed, pulled herself up, but the thing had her in an iron grip - to which the only logical response she could come up with was jumping down the bed and stomping desperately whatever had come out of it. She kicked down, without looking, again, again, and again.

"Ouch! Bulma, please, stop, it's me!" said a familiar, masculine voice.

She calmed down and looked at the floor. Peeking out from under her bed, one hand in front of his face to protect it, was Yamcha.

"What do you want?" whispered Bulma, suddenly cooling down at the realisation that in her room
was a man who could easily break her neck with a single hand. "We can come to an agreement."

Yamcha's attempt at a reassuring smile cracked into a horrified expression. "Please save me from the crazy murder cat." he pleaded, letting Bulma's hand go.

The girl did a double take. "Wait a second," she asked, "you're not in cahoots with Puar?"

This time was Yamcha's turn to be surprised. "How do you know about Puar?"

"I've got sources. How did you get in here?"

"Window. I was looking for a place to hide and ask for your help."

"Why couldn't you just come through the door like normal people?" asked Bulma, sceptical.

Yamcha looked around, paranoid. "He can see things." he said. "I don't know how but he knew stuff. What phone calls you made or where you went. He must have a spy in here. Maybe he hacked something in your computer system."

"Hacked? Is he able to do stuff like that?"

"He never was," admitted the boy. "But yesterday I told him he could try using our computer to read a bit from your library and since then he's been behaving very weirdly. Knows a lot of strange stuff, like that paper I mentioned yesterday."

"Hah. Knew that couldn't be you." Bulma sneered. "Give me a second then."

Yamcha nodded, while Bulma turned around to open a drawer and rummage through its contents. Strangely, he realised, for all his short but intense period of womanizing during his baseball career, he still wasn't very used to be in a girl's room. It felt somewhat of an alien, unexplored space to him, of which he had only been given glimpses. What did girls keep in their drawers usually?

Bulma extracted a gun and a clip from the drawer, loaded the weapon, and fired one shot at a corner of her room without a moment's hesitation. A small security camera of the sort that were spread all around the house exploded in a shower of plastic and glass fragments.

"There, now we're alone." she concluded. "I know all I need to know about Puar's ability to transform - possibly more than you. What I need to understand is what exactly..."

The room was suddenly enveloped by smoke. It all erupted from a single point and immediately started dissipating; from the heart of the cloud came a tangle of slender tentacles, flailing around with sharp extremities towards Bulma. She reacted instinctively unloading the rest of the clip in the direction of the thing, which retracted - but one moment later, when the smoke dissipated, it was clearly visible that it had not been damaged. It was also clearly visible that the thing wasn't anything that had ever existed on Earth and possibly anywhere outside of someone's especially deranged nightmares. Bulma screamed, tried firing again now that the line of sight was better but her gun was empty. She fumbled towards the drawer to get another clip, but the creature was soon above her. The tentacles zoomed towards her, and their claws were clearly wet with some kind of liquid secretion.

Something zipped straight past her head at incredible speed. She couldn't see it, but it hit the creature on its side, and the creature screamed with an unnatural, high-pitched, child-like voice. There was another puff of smoke. The thing was gone.

"I'm sorry." said Yamcha, who now was behind Bulma, next to the room's desk and library. "I couldn't find anything else the size of a baseball, so I tossed that snowglobe you kept here. I... think I
might have broken it."

The girl turned around to look at him with wide, shocked eyes. "WHAT THE FUCK WAS THAT?" she screamed, shaking.

"That was Puar." uttered the other. "I think I hurt him, but he's probably become a mosquito or something and we lost him in the chaos."

"Yes, I realise that." hissed Bulma. "What I mean is, what the hell had he transformed into?"

Yamcha averted his gaze. "He said he can make stuff up now. Uh, he, uh, read a lot of science books like I asked him to, I guess, and now has a lot of ideas."

Bulma took a deep breath. "You allowed and encouraged a clearly psychologically unstable creature whose transformation ability is limited only by his knowledge," she said calmly, "to access a complete scientific library and our computer system?"

"Yes." the boy gulped. "Am I... am I fired?"

"Fired?" the girl gave him a strange look, as if she was wondering if she was even talking with a creature able to understand her words. "No, you're not fired. I need your help tonight."

"Oh, thank the heavens!" sighed Yamcha in relief.

"To make sure that there's still a world or a humanity tomorrow."

"Wait, what?" he screamed.

Loud, furious knocking came from outside the door. "Bulma!" called Panchy, upset. "What happened? I heard noises and I swear that sounded like gunsho-"

Coming from downstairs, an explosion rocked the house. Alarms started firing and every sprinkler in the building simultaneously showered the rooms with water. Bulma grabbed a few more ammo clips, put them in a handbag, slung it around her shoulder, grabbed Yamcha's hand and dragged him outside. Before her stupefied mother could even recover from her surprise she raised her gun and again shot the security camera on the landing.

"Sorry mom," she explained, "we kind of have an emergency."

"The kitchen just exploded." mumbled Panchy, transfixed.

"Yes, I realised. Wait, where's dad?"

"Oh, in his studio." the woman got up on her feet, with Yamcha's help. "I always say that not even cannon fire could distract him from his books, and well..."

Bulma frowned. "Let's go."

They ran quickly downstairs - Panchy fumbling around, still confused, and leaning on the young man now and then to avoid falling - and passed right next to the kitchen, which was reduced to a blackened, blasted mess, with some pieces of furniture still smouldering. The studio was past that, the door still closed. Bulma burst in. Dr. Briefs was on an armchair, head reclined, a few printed sheets of paper falling from his hand abandoned on his side. The girl ran quickly to his side and put two fingers to his neck to feel his pulse.

"Yamcha!" she called. "Help me drag him out of here and into the bedroom upstairs. And try to
breathe as little as possible!"

The boy obeyed, and easily lifted the old man and tossed him on his shoulder. A minute later he was putting him down on the double bed. Bulma sent her mother to fetch some water from the bathroom and asked Yamcha to destroy the local camera, which he did with a quick jump and a punch. They also opened the windows to ensure as much fresh air as possible came in. After a while, Dr. Briefs finally opened his eyes again.

"What happened?" he asked, with a slurry voice.

"You suffered a slight case of carbon monoxide poisoning." explained Bulma.

"Also, the kitchen just exploded." chimed in Panchy.

He shook his head. "That's it, honey." he said. "I don't care what your magazines say about cooking with gas, we're getting those electric hot plates."

Bulma shook her head. "That's probably a good idea, dad, but not the main issue. It's that thing I mentioned earlier today."

"The magical..."

"The magical transforming creature, yes. Let's say," the girl tossed a sideways glance at Yamcha. "mistakes were made. Now he's on the loose, trying to kill us, and in control of Caroline."

Dr. Briefs sighed. "I don't suppose you have any good news?"

"The good news is, he's new at this. So we have a fighting chance. Also, Yamcha here just managed to hurt him, which ought to help."

"Right," the old man pulled himself to a sitting position on the bed, then fell down almost immediately. He clearly had not fully recovered. "We need to put the whole facility on quarantine. Biological and digital. I have the remote control always with me, just in case."

"Do the digital one." said Bulma. "But for the biological, give me a minute. Once we're shut down from the outside we can't communicate in any way, and there's one other thing that worries me."

She looked into her bag to extract her smartphone. The bedroom had a window, and rising above the skyline of West City, she could now see the bright, full circle of the Moon.

With a swipe of her finger she called up the number of the phone she had given Goku that morning.

The speakers rang a loud chirping tune. Almost as soon as they started blaring, Goku jumped up from his bed, pole in hand, and it took him a moment to relax and realise there was no immediate danger. Years of sleeping alone in the mountains, sometimes camping outside, amongst bears and tigers, had left some habits that probably wouldn't go away any time soon.

"What's this?" he asked, out loud. "Caroline?"

The tune stopped. There was a clicking sound and then from the speakers came a soft white noise, like the background of a poor microphone. Then "Hello? Goku, do you hear me?" asked Bulma's voice. It was distorted, distant. The transmission's quality was low.

"Yes, I hear you. What is happening?"
"Oh, finally." the voice sighed. "I've been trying to get in touch for so long, but your phone doesn't work! Did you turn it off?"

Goku picked the phone up from his bedside table and checked it. "I think it's the signal." he concluded. "You said that there need to be those wavy symbols around the antenna, right?"

"Right. I guess the gym in lockdown mode blocks all phone calls too. Damn, sorry for not seeing that coming. Listen," Bulma sounded worried, "you have slept through it all, but tonight there have been... problems."

"Are you safe?" Goku frowned. "It sounds serious."

"It was, but it's over now. I had to regain control of Caroline to even manage to use the speaker system. But I'd like you to come over, so we can talk about it in person."

"But tonight is..." started Goku, then he saw the large digital clock on the gym's wall. It marked 9 AM. "I have slept a lot." he commented, a bit surprised.

"It's not like Caroline would have woken you up, given what happened. Look, just undo the lockdown and come out, it's morning and the Moon has set by now. We can go over this. Just... don't be too shocked when you see the house."

"I'll do my best."

Now he was genuinely worried. He quickly wore his gi, tossed the nyoibo over his shoulder, grabbed the cellphone and ran to the door. After pushing the button, all the sealed openings of the gym started sliding open again.

"I can't get a signal." said Bulma.

"Who is that you're trying to call? Goku?" asked Yamcha. "Do we really need his help too?"

"It's not that." the girl shook her head. "I need to warn him to not set foot outside the gym, no matter what happens, and stay on guard. Puar might try something. Damn, I should have imagined the lockdown would block the phone signal. Stupid me."

The young man looked incredulous. "Warn him to not-? You mean that full Moon thing is real?"

He didn't think Bulma could look scarier than she had before. She did. "What do you know about that full Moon thing?" she hissed.

"That was, huh. He was chatting with Spike, and I overheard. I think Spike had some weird ideas about him, you know, that sort of nonsense he blathers about all the time. He invited him to some kind of training in the full Moon, and Goku refused, and Spike then made up his mind that it meant that Goku transformed into a monkey monster or something."

Bulma grabbed him by his shoulders and pulled him towards her. "WERE YOU WEARING PUAR WHEN YOU HEARD THAT?" she shouted.

"I was." he said.

The girl let him go and had to lean on a dresser to stop herself from falling. She held a hand to her head and looked generally unwell.

"Bulma, are you seriously telling me Goku is actually a weremonkey?"
Goku stood outside of the gym's door, which he had crossed too quickly to realise that something was wrong. His hand still clutched the cellphone, his eyes stared at the sky, transfixed and dilated in fear. His pupils were shrunken to a pinhead.

In front of him, the full Moon shone her light in a terse night sky.

Inside his chest, his heartbeat got faster, louder, angrier.

Chapter End Notes

We're almost at the end of this arc - next chapter will be the dramatic conclusion! I realise this has been a bit of a weird arc for a Dragonball story at all. I must admit the idea started as me trying to liven up a bit an otherwise uneventful stretch of chapters, but I ended up tying a lot of stuff into it (including some really important future foreshadowing, and a bit of my taste for horror/sci-fi scenarios - too bad I didn't get to post this in time for Halloween). Next arc will take us on a far more familiar stage - or should I say, ring. You get my drift.

Thanks for reviews and kudos!
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the idea and characters of Dragon Ball are owned by Akira Toriyama. This is a simple non-profit fan parody.

Chapter 16 - King Wukong

Bulma, her parents, and Yamcha were sitting in a bedroom. It was night outside, and all communication lines from the house had been cut in order to isolate the now hopelessly deranged master computer that controlled most of its functionality from the outside world. The kitchen had just exploded and may still be burning; another room was full of poisonous gas. Somewhere in that building was a crazed creature able to transform at will and waiting for its chance to strike at them and kill them - except Yamcha, for whom it felt a perverse form of love. And outside was Bulma's best friend, most likely about to transform into an as of yet unknown but surely terrifying giant ape monster.

It was, not to put too fine a point on it, not the most pleasant way to spend the evening. Bulma found herself wondering whether it could qualify as the worst situation she'd ever been in. That this was even a question said a lot about how crazy her life had gotten recently.

When her phone rang, everyone jumped up. Yamcha reacted quickly and smashed a bedside lamp with a fist, then played it cool as if nothing had happened. Given the situation, Bulma would not have bothered answering, had she not seen that the call came from Goku.

"Goku, what's happening?" she said. "Is it all right? Are you still in the gym?"

"No," answered the voice. It was raspy, raucous, and broken by heavy breathing. "I am on the kintoun. Flying north of the City. Been going straight for... thirty seconds now."

Bulma tensed up and put the phone in loudspeak mode for everyone else. "Ok, I see. You're doing the right thing. Are you out of the inhabited centre yet?"

"Yes, but it's still... too close." the kid groaned in pain. "I'll keep going... until I can. Bulma, in case... I still have time to... myself..."

"NO!" shouted the girl. She had thought of that, and knew he would think of it too. "No, look, we can do this. I'll send help. Just get as far as possible! Stay focused! Keep it under control as much as you can."

"Easy... to say... ARRGH!" Goku screamed, and midway through, his pain became rage, and his scream a roar. "I can't... think..."

Everyone in the bedroom held their breath.

"I don't want to!" pleaded the kid.
Then there was a crunching sound, and the call abruptly ceased.

No one managed to speak for almost a minute.

"You do realise," said finally Bulma, slowly, looking Yamcha in the eyes, "that I'm going to fucking kill that cat friend of yours for all of this, yes?"

The boy nodded. Panchy seemed bothered by Bulma's choice of language, but her husband gestured that she'd probably better not say anything.

The girl drew a deep breath. "Right. So, planning time. Yamcha, you go wake up our merry quartet of freaks. I know it's not technically in their contract, but I hope they'll feel like saving the city from destruction is worth their time. Anyway don't waste too much time trying to convince them. Pick up whoever wants to come and go north. Intercept Goku as far as possible out of the city. Don't engage if you're not sure of what you're doing! Don't fight him head on. Try to distract him, slow him down, anything. You need to keep him busy until the Moon sets, or until we figure out how to make him revert."

"This sounds dangerous." commented the fighter.

"It is. But it's also the only way of making sure no one dies because of your little cat buddy." replied Bulma. "Besides, think about it. You save the city tonight, that's the one thing that may rehabilitate your name in front of everyone. We'll make sure to omit the part you played in causing the incident, of course."

Yamcha sighed and nodded, resigned.

"Leave now. We'll go into biological quarantine, which means everything will be sealed. We won't be able to communicate any more."

The boy couldn't believe his ears. "Are you serious? Will you stay locked in here, against... him?"

"If it wants to kill me, I won't getta a better playing field." Bulma shrugged. "I'll manage. I usually do."

Yamcha didn't find it polite to point out that, despite her apparent bravado, she was shaking. All he could muster was a faint smile and a thumbs up.

"I'll be back. For my severance pay, I guess." he said.

Bulma laughed. "That one will go into fixing the damages you caused. Come on, go already!"

With a last goodbye gesture, Yamcha climbed on the windowsill and jumped down. Bulma nodded towards her father, and he pushed a button on a remote. An alarm started sounding in every room of the house. All windows closed automatically and were sealed by metallic curtains; the air circulation system shut down. Of all the security measures Dr. Briefs had installed in the house due to his experimental activities, this was one of the most extreme. It wasn't meant to save the occupants; it was meant to preserve anyone outside from dying as well.

"Honey," asked Panchy, "what's going to happen?"

"We'll be alright." said Bulma, clutching her gun. "First thing, I'll lead you guys to the panic room in the basement."

"What? No!" shouted her father. "You can't just lock us away in a safe place while you fight that
"If it makes you feel better, it won't be safe." replied the girl. "At best, enough of an annoyance that Puar will focus on me. Dad, you're already in bad shape. Mom looks like she's about to have a nervous fit. I'm not letting you be around. Frankly, you'd probably be a liability."

The old man sighed. "You may be right. But at least promise me you'll be as smart and careful as you can be."

"I'll work on the careful part." Bulma smiled bitterly. She put her hand on the door knob.

"And it's two floors down to the basement. Grab everything that could be a weapon in this room, because you may still get your chance to fight."

The wound had been superficial, but it hurt, and it bled. His new form had not been thought up much for taking punishment, it was all attack - so that hit probably had more effect than it should have. Puar had withdrawn in a small, isolated corner of the house to recover, hidden under a shelf in the form of a cockroach. Transforming back was easy enough - the new form was as good as new. But the pain, the shock, remained, and needed some time to heal.

As an insect he had been too small to host any electronics that allowed him to interface with Caroline. Without that constant presence and his ability to rely on it to offload most of his chaotic thoughts, Puar felt lost. The way looked less clear, more uncertain. He only knew he wanted to make Yamcha happy, but had a hard time remembering how he was supposed to do that. Carefully, making sure that no one was around, Puar hazarded going back to his cat form, enhanced by a few additions. He closed his eyes and connected with the computer. The touch of the knowledge and computational power he had grown used to soothed him. It was like finding back his clarity after a long drug-induced haze.

He was slightly displeased to find that a lot of his surveillance capability had been destroyed - most cameras on the first and ground floor of the house were gone. Bulma and the others had to be in one of the rooms that weren't covered any more, because he couldn't see them. Still, he had plenty of possibilities to plan the next attack.

He changed into an alien form - an unusually flat snake, or perhaps an extremely large flatworm - and slid under the door, with only as much as a whisper.

"Wake up! Everyone!"

Yamcha stormed through the dorm, knocking furiously at all the rooms. When Bandages got out of the room, still rubbing his eyes, everyone was already gathered in the hall. He passed next to See Through's floating pajamas to come closer to the origin of the ruckus.

"What's goin' on?" he asked Fangs.

The vampire shrugged. "Apparently Goku transformed into a cat and a giant Bulma is trying to kill a gorilla."

"That's not what I said at all!!" Yamcha, clearly in an altered state, clutched his fists. "I said..."

Spike silenced him with a solemn gesture and took his place at the centre of the small crowd.

"Companions in darkness," he started, "while I had not shared all of this information with you all -
for his own protection - there is no secret to hide any more. As you know from today's training, Goku shares with us a curse. He has now fallen prey to it, awakened to it by the power of the full Moon, due to the trickery of an enemy whose nature right now escapes me. He is fighting this curse as we speak, while his body, no longer under his control, rampages in blind fury."

"Cut it short, Spike." intervened Bandages. "You want us to go help?"

"That is what I was about to ask you, yes." concluded the other, soberly.

Yamcha shook his head and stepped slightly away. This was the part where they would obviously do the sensible thing and let him deal with the giant monster, while they ran as far as possible.

"Hell yeah we're going!" roared the mummy. "The boy still owes me a grudge match."

"Me and Fangs, I don't know how much we can help," said See Through, "but if there's anything we can do, we'll tag along."

Spike nodded vigorously. "Then it's decided! The Denizens march on to the battle."

Yamcha could not believe his ears. It took him remembering that, even in five, they were still going up against an unknown giant monkey monster to sober him up a bit.

"Great!" he said, finally. "Then we should all move as quickly as possible. Let's leave the dorm."

They ran outside. Goku had said he'd been flying north, but from their current position, they couldn't see anything. West City's skyline covered the horizon. That was a good sign - the kid must have made it far enough that he wasn't causing any visible damage.

"We need to find him." said Yamcha. "How do we move?"

Bandages put a hand on his shoulder. "You and Spike can try keepin' up with me. I can run pretty fast."

"Running will not be enough, my friend." observed Spike. "We need to find Goku as well. A vantage point could be helpful to spot him. I suggest we move by both running and jumping - surely we three should all be able to jump a few dozen metres between building roofs."

Yamcha scoffed at the absurd question. Of course he could.

"There's also us normal people here, you know." said See Through, whose pajamas were visibly shaking in the cold of the night.

"I'll give you guys a ride." proposed the mummy. He kneeled to take up the invisible man, while Fangs transformed into a bat and perched himself up on his head.

"Let's go!"

Yamcha, Spike and Bandages ran through the lawn that surrounded the Capsule Corp buildings, jumped above the surrounding fence, then on top of the closest building, too fast for the eyes of the few amazed observers to make out their faces.

With a prolonged creak, the Briefs' bedroom door opened. From it stepped out three figures that you could barely call human; three bloated round bundles of fabric and fur. Carefully, one of the three figures looked left and right, protruding an arm holding a gun. Then it gestured to the others that they could come forward.
"It's free." whispered Bulma, with a voice muffled by all the layers of scarves, hoods and fur coats that she had wrapped around her head and neck.

Her parents caught up to her, carefully. Among the three of them, they probably wore half of Panchy's wardrobe. Since no one in the house was in the habit of keeping body armour among their clothes, piling up multiple layers of thick, fluffy coats was the next best thing Bulma could come up with for defence. For offence, they had her gun, and a number of other items that they had gathered from the room or already had on themselves; a hairspray can, some bedsheets, a lighter.

The hall was dark. Lights in all the common spaces were controlled by Caroline, and Caroline obviously was not being cooperative. Dr. Briefs lit an electric torch they kept in their bedroom for any emergencies, but the beam was too narrow to see much besides what was right in front of them.

In this darkness, from which an enemy could attack them at any moment, they needed to cross two floors to their destination.

Bulma visualised the path they needed to take. There was the hall, which then morphed into a loft, with a railing right above the living room, which in turn was next to the kitchen, or what was left of it. At the end of the loft was the landing of the stairs, in front of her bedroom. Then it was down the stairs, across the living room, through another hall, and down another flight of stairs to reach the basement - at which point the panic room would be the first thing right in front of them.

She took one step forward. Deep breath, and she listened intently. The house was silent.

It was too much to hope that Yamcha's hit alone had disabled or even killed Puar for good. He probably had only been scared off from attacking them - but now that Yamcha was not in the equation any more, and that he had a way to realise, that peace was not likely to last much. He would attack. Where and when, was the question.

Another few steps, right up to the beginning of the loft. Her parents followed suit. Now they were about to enter in the range of another of Caroline's cameras, but that meant the camera too would be in Bulma's line of sight. She raised her gun, fired twice. The camera's remains dangled out of the ceiling, limp.

The shots reverberated through the house and left a ringing sensation in her ears - the same would happen to her parents, she realised, and she felt stupid. Now they were effectively deaf to any but the loudest sounds for a few seconds. She had just created a perfect opening. She frantically signalled to her father to look around with the torch, gripped her gun.

Nothing happened.

Her ears adjusted again to the silence. It was another six or seven steps to the landing. Step, step, step.

Step.

"Bulma, behind you!" screamed Panchy's voice. The girl instantly reacted, turning on one foot, gun pointed straight forward, looking for an attacker.

"That wasn't me!" said her mother, and the attacker came. What saved Bulma was the motion sensors installed the day before in front of her room. She had turned them on when leaving the room, earlier, and now, when the creature passed right in front of the door to sneak on her from behind, having used Caroline's imitation to distract her, they rang their alarm in full force. Bulma turned again to face something - this time it was smaller, had less tentacles, and a body covered by a hard
chitinous shell, like a mutant crab. Its claws protruded towards her, its hind legs flexed, it jumped like a grasshopper, aiming at her neck. She defended herself with her arm, and fangs and claws sank into the many layers of clothing, thankfully without reaching skin. With the other hand, still free, she fired the gun at Puar. The creature was knocked back, but then it got up almost immediately. Its carapace must be enough to withstand even a bullet fired point blank.

"Dad! Mom!" shouted Bulma. Shaken from her stupor, Panchy followed the plan and tossed the bedsheets she was holding towards the enemy. It was a large king-size cotton sheet, drenched in liquid. It fell over the crab-like thing, which immediately tried furiously to wrestle free. The strong alcoholic sting of an entire bottle of very expensive perfume that had been poured over it spread around.

"Now!"

Dr. Briefs stepped up, trembling, and held his lighter in front of him, and right behind a can of his wife's hairspray. He turned the lighter on and sprayed the liquid - in rapid and short bursts, to avoid backflame - hitting the monster with his makeshift flamethrower. The bedsheets and the flammable perfume immediately caught fire, and one moment later, the thing was shrieking in pain and scrambling around.

"Let's go! Run!"

Bulma dragged her parents down the stairs. Above, the torched creature exploded in a puff of smoke, the remains of the sheets finished burning on the floor and the sprinklers turned on again to extinguish them, while Puar had escaped again. The girl ditched the outer layer of her clothes - now pierced and dripping some noxious, unknown venom that the crab thing had been secreting. She didn't want to risk even breathing its vapours for too long.

"Run!"

"I see him!"

Yamcha, Bandages and Spike had separated in a fan, covering a wide angle of directions while they moved north, jumping roof to roof across West City. The buildings had gotten shorter now, as they reached the residential areas in the outskirts of the urban conglomerate, and they could already spot the hills and countryside past its boundaries. Yamcha moved eastwards to catch up to the other two, calling out to them as soon as they were in hearing range. They quickly gathered on top of a building, where they could get a bird's eye view of the landscape.

Far in the distance, in the fields, a gigantic creature rampaged. It seemed to roam aimlessly, occasionally ripping off a tree or tossing a boulder in the air.

"There he is." confirmed Spike. "He's still a way from here. Have the citizens noticed yet?"

Yamcha nodded. "Some. That's how I saw him. People were gathering in some streets, staring and pointing. Some were filming. I don't think we can hide this any more."

"Bit of a big thing to hide." commented Bandages.

The boy squinted. "How big do you think he is? I can't make it out at this distance."

"Hard to say." the devil man shook his head. "Probably 20 metres or so, comparing him to those trees. This might be the most powerful curse I have ever encountered. We should get closer and take a better look. I think it's safe enough if we keep some distance."
Without houses any more, the three descended to the ground and started running. There were no witnesses close enough to see them, and they were too fast to be spotted anyway. At a few hundred metres from Goku, his new size was apparent. He looked like some unknown kind of monkey, a weird hybrid between a gorilla and a baboon, and was as tall as a multi-storey building. Trying to assess his power, Yamcha considered that even regular Goku had managed to kick Bandages' ass, then scaled that up appropriately. The picture was not pretty.

They stopped in the middle of a field and gathered up to look at the creature. The giant primate seemed uninterested by them, although he had not noticed them yet. He stood immobile for a while, then reacted in quick bursts of random anger to anything that moved next to him. He once grabbed and smashed a heavy rock against the ground repeatedly after it had rolled down from a mound of earth. A poor cow that happened to be grazing nearby was tossed into the sky - her pitiful mooing vanishing in the distance.

"He seems distracted." whispered Yamcha. "Maybe if we let him be he'll just stay here until the moon sets?"

Spike shook his head. "I doubt we will get that much time. You said he was seen. Do you think he will be left alone?"

"Oh, crap. You think they're going to call the police?"

"At first." he sighed. "Then the real trouble will start."

---

West City Police Department, northern precinct, 10:23 PM

"Captain, we had another one of those calls. About the giant monkey."

"Another? What is this, prank night?"

"This time they sent us a link to a video. It's blurry and it could be fake, but, well, you should check out for yourself."

"Let me see."

"Here."

"..."

"..."

"Who's on patrol in that area tonight?"

"It's Willis and Jaa."

"Ok, give them a call. Tell them to check this out. If this is a prank, at this point, I want names and addresses. If these people are so eager to get into trouble, no reason to disappoint them."

---

Royal Army North-West Airbase, 10:56 PM
"Sir, it's an urgent call from the West City Police. They ask for backup."

"Backup? What, they can't handle a couple of thieves and they want us to bomb them?"

"Apparently, they have a problem with a big monkey."

"What the hell? We're not some sort of pest control service for escaped zoo animals!"

"That's what I told them, sir. But they said it's a really big monkey."

"How big?"

"Approximately twenty-five metres tall, says the officer who saw it. But he can't give a better estimate because he didn't dare getting closer."

"..."

"That was my reaction too, yes."

"This has to be a joke."

"They're really insistent, sir. And if I may, they also sounded quite scared."

"Well, I'll be... I'll give a call to their precinct's captain, try to clear this up. Meanwhile, go tell a couple pilots to get ready to scramble, and have the mechanics prepare their fighters. You never know."

The job had turned out to be far less dangerous and far more boring than Yamcha had anticipated. It was almost half an hour now that they kept guarding Goku, but he hardly did anything really dangerous - or at least, anything that could actually damage anyone in the area he was at the moment. Seemed like he was equally content with raging against inanimate things. The group of fighters had turned to physical exercise to warm themselves up a bit. They took turns running back and forth and training katas, while only one or two stood still and always kept an eye on the giant monkey.

"Say," said Yamcha, looking at the creature, "he looks even stupider than a normal animal would be. Usually animals don't just break stuff for the heck of it."

"He's perpetually angry," commented Spike. "Goku was quite right about that being the key emotion of his curse. His mind isn't clear - if it was, perhaps, he could even be reasoned with."

A whooshing sound came from the sky, and while it was hard to see their silhouettes against the night, the navigation lights and exhaust gave away the fact that two planes were flying above their heads.

Bandages stopped his exercises. "Dang, is that the army?"

"I fear so," Spike said gravely. "Unfortunately, in pursuing their own safety, humans might accelerate their demise. Such is the nature of our kind."

The planes didn't do much at first and seemed to just be scouting, flying in large circles above the area. After a while, however, one of the two separated and dove straight for the centre, pointing at Goku.

"Oh, hell!" screamed Yamcha. "They're going to kill him!"
"No, they're not." replied the devil man.

A series of short, loud cracking sounds came as the plane fired its guns at the creature. But the giant monkey didn't even flinch - at first. Then he slowly turned around towards the direction the bullets had come from, grabbed a nearby rock, wended back his arm.

And then the air itself became made of pure pain for a moment, as the bang from a boulder tossed at multiple times the speed of sound shook the land. The warriors took refuge on the ground, covering their ears.

"They made him angrier." muttered Spike.

The plane was safe, though the shockwave had likely shaken it a bit. It retreated, and both it and its companion turned off their lights and slowed down their engines, becoming almost invisible in the night. Goku now was confused, looking around, growling menacingly. The lights had been his target. The lights had hurt him. The lights needed to be destroyed.

As it turned out, south of his position, he saw there were a lot of lights.

"He's looking this way." whispered Yamcha.

The monster started stepping towards the city. Slow, but determined. Then he wasn't even slow any more.

"He's coming this way!" shouted Yamcha.

"We can see that!" roared Bandages. "Let's scram!"

Running, roaring, the giant monkey hurled towards West City.

It had taken approximately twelve point three seconds after the end of the previous attack for Caroline (Puar? Puaroline?) to come up with a new, obnoxious idea.

Lights and sounds.

When deciding which systems to leave to the smart home controller and which systems to prevent it from accessing for safety purposes, Dr. Briefs had decided lighting and sound diffusion systems were pretty safe, and in fact, exactly the kind of thing that it's convenient for a smart home to be able to handle. So he had not worried much about it and had given full control of both of them to Caroline. What was the worst she could do?

The worst turned out to be much worse than anyone could have imagined. A loud cacophony of horribly mismatched, tone-deaf sounds, with no rhythm or pattern, impossible to escape from, shouted from all speakers at once. Worse, each speaker played its own tune, each as horrible as the others. And it would have perhaps been barely tolerable if not for the lights, going on and off in random stroboscopic patterns which were of course on their own rhythm, completely independent of the sound. The result was confusing, nauseating, maddening. The first assault had nearly caused Panchy to lose her sense of balance and fall down the stairs. They had to physically slow down their walk through the house, towards the panic room, in order to make sure they didn't stumble somewhere, confused by the assault on their senses, while keeping hands and clothes pressed against their ears to try and muffle the sounds. Bulma cursed each second lost because of this hindrance. It wasn't clear if and how Puar needed to recover when damaged, but it was a fact that he had waited some time between his previous assaults, which suggested he probably did. If that was the case, time was their enemy, and acting as fast as possible would be their best shot.
The noises started changing up and down, lowering in volume just to get them to relax a little and then hitting them back at full power. Dr. Briefs leaned on Panchy again, but the woman herself wasn't too sure on her feet. While they were crossing the living room, Bulma angrily grabbed a tall floor lamp and smashed it like a spear into one of the speakers. The noise got slightly tolerable, but as soon as they reached the next flight of stairs they were again in the range of a working speaker.

Mixed to the noise there were voices - usually imitations of one of the three humans', but Bulma was sure she also heard Goku's and Yamcha's in the chaos. Anything that could distract them. At one point Bulma turned to react to a sudden threatening hiss, clutching her gun, finger ready on the trigger, only to realise horrified that she'd been about to shoot her mother.

As she lowered the gun and looked away, she added that to the mental list of things this cursed creature would have to answer for.

In front of the end of the stairs was the panic room. It had a massive security door and a keypad to open it. It had been installed mostly for Panchy, who worried about thieves entering the house - Dr. Briefs wasn't practical enough to worry about that, and Bulma wasn't sensible enough to want to hide in such a situation. After all, she wouldn't follow them inside in this situation either - which arguably was a bit worse than a simple robbery.

"How does it work?" she asked her father, screaming over the noise. Dr. Briefs staggered to the door.

"It has a code." he said. "You can use it to open it from the inside or outside, or to lock it until the code is used again from the inside only. That's to stop intruders from brute forcing their way in. Though it's 14 digits, so it's not very likely anyway."

"Is it connected to Caroline?"

"Yes, so she could call the cops if it's ever used and locked. But she doesn't have the code." he raised his hand, but his fingers were trembling and he didn't manage to push the right buttons. "Damn. Panchy, dear, can you help me?"

"I don't remember the password, honey!" exclaimed his wife.

"Well, tell her, dad!" said Bulma.

He blinked. "Out loud? But Caroline is listening. She could use the code to lock the room and keep us out."

"It's fine." replied the girl. "She doesn't know."

Dr. Briefs' puzzled stare settled into understanding. "Oh, right. The code is 14356478909131."

"Wait a moment!" screamed Panchy, scrambling to push the buttons. "I can't follow if you say it so fast, with all this cursed noise! What's after the first three?"

"Seven." chimed in Bulma.

"What? I was sure it was..."

"It's seven." confirmed Dr. Briefs. "Go!"

"Ok, seven, then WHAT?" she shrieked. The noise kept blasting in new patterns.
"Nine!" "Zero!" screamed her daughter and husband, respectively.

"WHICH ONE?!"

"Zero!" confirmed Bulma. "Go! Quick! Before Caroline locks it!"

Panchy cried some nonsense, her fingers frantically looking for the right key, when there was a final explosion, the ground trembled for a moment, and then nothing. Quiet finally came back. The lights stayed off, but the emergency ones turned on after a moment, with a soft electric buzz.

It was like heaven.

"What happened?" asked Panchy, alarmed. "Did I do something wrong?"

"It's fine, dear," the doctor sighed and let himself lean against the wall. "Now I will need to rebuild her, though."

"Seriously, dad, please don't." Bulma shook her head. "Mom, Caroline was rigged with explosives that would destroy her hard drive in case she tried to access any password-protected system and failed three times. But Puar didn't know. We kept giving you wrong codes hoping that he'd try them through her, and turns out, it worked. Now she's out of the equation."

"So you were giving me nonsense numbers!" said her mother, indignant. "I felt like you were making a fool out of me."

"Sorry, had to fool you to fool them." Bulma shrugged. "Now, dad, try to calm yourself a bit and input the real password yourself. I wouldn't want Puar to be eavesdropping. This isn't over yet."

Mrs. Kofi walked slowly to the entrance, pushing the rollator she heavily relied on to stand. In the time it took her to get up and reach the door, the person had rung five times, and then had just put the finger on the doorbell and never took it off, so now the ringing was continuous. People these days had no patience, she thought.

She removed carefully the four separate bolts keeping the door locked, then opened it. Out was a nice young man with long hair, very fit.

"What do you sell?" asked the old woman.

"Nothing!" said the boy. He really looked like he had no patience at all, Mrs. Kofi noticed, shaking her head in disapproval. "We are evacuating the area! You need to leave your house now!"

"Is it for that building company?" the woman frowned. "I said I will not sell my house five times already."

"It's not that! Listen, madam, it's just that..."

Someone ran to the nice young man. He was pale like the dead and had pointy teeth and a red glint in his eyes. Mrs. Kofi held her chest and started mumbling old chants to ward off evil spirits.

"Yamcha, we have to go now!" said the evil spirit, unaffected.

"Ok, Fangs, I'll catch up!" the young man turned back to Mrs. Kofi. "I'm sorry, madam, it's for your own safety."

And imagine that - he swept in with an arm, grabbed her by her waist, and pulled her out of her
house. One second later, more stunned than scared yet, she felt a sudden jolt and up she was in the air, while behind her her house was crushed by a giant hairy foot.

"I'm sorry, madam." mumbled the man who held her. "I'm really sorry. You must be terrified."

"I'm not." said the woman, in some sort of a dreamy state. "This is it, right? It is my day, and you have come to take my soul to heaven."

The young man - obviously an angel - looked at her a bit perplexed, and then "Sure, why not." he said. "If it makes you feel better about the situation."

Having travelled a few hundred metres, Yamcha dropped Mrs. Kofi in a large group of people who were abandoning the area. A few policemen were supervising the operation, and while they had already seen him and his friends in action, they still observed with a certain fascination.

"This was the last one, I believe." said Yamcha to the closest agent. "You should move away as soon as possible, maybe towards some other residential neighbourhood. It's directed towards the centre, so warn those people too. And if you could please tell your aviation to stop trying to attack it..."

"Sorry, can't do." mumbled the agent. "We're grateful to you... huh... civilians for your help, but we can't take your orders on how to deal with the crisis."

"Oh, come on! We're doing better than you anyway."

"No, we're not. We're losing. We're working behind the scenes, trying to make this whole situation look like it's under control. Goku had already taken down one of the Royal Aviation's fighter jets, though the pilot had managed to escape with his ejection seat. "And all you're doing is making it angrier!"

"I noticed, yes." admitted the other. "I'll tell my superiors. See what they can do."

"Right. See ya."

Yamcha zoomed away towards the direction in which Goku was now rampaging through the residential areas of West City. Houses were crushed under his foot, cars became his playthings, but at the very least, no one had died. Yet.

He hoped some of those officers recognised him so that his unquestionable heroism would regain him a bit of recognition.

"The people are safe for now." he said, landing from his last jump right next to Spike. They were standing on the scaffolding of a phone tower, one of the few vantage points in the area. "Goku is advancing slowly."

"Next time, it may not be so easy." commented Spike gravely. "The houses here are small and low. If he reaches the more densely populated area, there will be no time to evacuate them."

"But maybe he won't, right? I mean, look, he's having fun. Smashing that bus on top of that school."

"He may keep roaming aimlessly." admitted the other. "But only if he's not bothered any more."

In that moment, a bat exploded in smoke and Fangs landed next to them. "I've seen the army! There's a column of tanks travelling on a road leading to the city."

"Oh for f**k's sake!" exclaimed Yamcha. "How badly do they want to die?"
"A whole lot, it seems." said the man, shrugging. "They'll be here in fifteen, twenty minutes tops."

Spike frowned. "We can't allow Goku to fight them. There will be victims."

"I know, man, okay? We're all trying to figure out how to stop that."

"There is only one way."

Without a word more, the devil man jumped off, and once he touched the street, he started running towards Goku, a few blocks ahead.

"Where is he going?" asked Bandages, who had just swung up the tower himself.

"I don't know." said Yamcha. "He said something about the only way to stop Goku from fighting the army."

"Oh, dang." the man shook his head. "Pity. He's going to kill the boy."

"Wait, what?"

Spike walked up to Goku, until he was only a few metres away. The giant monkey let the burnt, crushed wreckage of a bus he was still clutching fall, and turned to the new arrival, with a look of curiosity. He retracted his lips over his gums in a menacing grimace. Curiosity was quick to turn into murderous rage.

"I honour your sacrifice, fellow Denizen." said solemnly Spike. "Your battle against your curse will not be forgotten. Let me bear the weight of being the one who relieves you of it."

He raised his fingers to his forehead. A light started shining around their tips.

"It will be painless, at least. Or so I hope."

He extended his arms, pointing the fingers - now flashing with sparkles of unnatural light - right at the creature. A tear rolled down his cheek.

"Let the darkness in your heart consume your body!" he screamed. "DEVIL BEAM!"

The flash split from his fingers and pierced the night, hitting Goku head on. The giant monster was wrapped in pink light, so bright that it was almost like dawn had broke earlier than it should have. He roared to the sky, clutching his fists.

And then he hurled one towards Spike.

"WATCH OUT!" Bandages' own wraps grabbed the devil man and tossed him aside one instant before the fist could smash him and the road below him. Yamcha caught up one instant later.

"Impossible..." mumbled Spike, transfixed. "His heart is truly pure... I could never have guessed."

"Yeah, whatever. You know, good thing it didn't work." the mummy grinned. "As I said, I still have a grudge match to settle."

"Wait, no!" Yamcha screamed, but there didn't seem to be much point in trying to stop Bandages. He jumped towards the monster and punched him right in the face. Goku barely flinched.

"Let's get out of here." he concluded, grabbing the devil man by his arm. "Come on, move."
"I can't believe myself. I tried to kill him." whispered Spike. "Leave me here! It is best for an existence as wicked as mine!"

"Ok, seriously? Have your crisis later! Bandages is gaining us some time, let's use it!"

"COME GET IT BOY!" screamed the mummy. It wasn't clear if his objective was just to gain time for his friends, or if he really thought he could take on Goku by himself and beat him to the ground before the army arrived. He dodged a few clumsy fists, then used his wraps to grab the monkey's head and swing around, getting himself up on the back of his neck. At which point all he could do was punch him, which basically did nothing but annoy him. Goku swatted at him like a man trying to crush a fly.

Yamcha and Spike saw their companion flying past them, straight into a building.

"Did he... did he survive that?" asked the boy, stuttering.

"I'm sure he did. Bandages is a tough bastard."

Just on cue, Bandages emerged from the rubble, beaten up but still full of fighting spirit. He grabbed some of the wreckage and chucked it at Goku, hitting him in the head. The monkey screamed in pain, but when it recovered, no visible wound had been left by the attack. The mummy charged at him again.

"Let's catch our breath." said Yamcha, dropping his companion on the ground. "Do you feel better now?"

"I think so." Spike nodded. "Sorry for that. I acted thinking it was for the best, really. But my beam needs me to feel certain things towards my target. I'd rather not dwell on it."

"Ok, fine. Listen, I get why you did that - if Goku kills someone while he's like this, it's going to be bad for all of us, him included. But it would not be really his fault." the boy scratched his head. "In fact, it's mine. So I would rather find a solution without anyone dying."

"Your fault? You will tell me later. We often give ourselves more guilt than we deserve." the devil man chuckled. "But yes, that would be best. Any ideas?"

"The Moon keeps him transformed." said Yamcha. "So, if we could get rid of the Moon..."

Spike stared at him like he would at a madman.

"I know it's a stupid idea!" exclaimed the other, defensive. "We're just spitballing here."

"Maybe his tail?"

Spike and Yamcha looked at each other. Neither had spoken. So they turned at the empty space to their right.

"See-Through?" they asked, in unison.

"Actually, I'm over here." said See-Through, exactly from the opposite side. "Sorry, I stripped down to help me evacuate the houses."

Yamcha blinked "How did it help?"

"I snuck in, grabbed some random object, and started making ghost-like noises. Everyone ran out like crazy without asking questions. I'm dying of cold though." he explained. "You were talking
about Goku, and I remembered that yesterday I stepped on his tail, and he mentioned that it was his weak point."

"He also said he trained it to make it stronger." pointed out Yamcha.

"I know he did!" admitted See-Through. "We're just spitballing here."

"At least it's not as stupid as the Moon one." mused Spike. "Perhaps, if we just could clutch his tail hard enough, or squeeze one of its pressure points, he would still feel the effect."

"So, is that our plan?" asked Yamcha. "Come close enough to the crazy monkey monster that we can grab him by his tail, squeeze it, and hope that makes him weak enough for us to knock him unconscious without killing him?"

"Bandages is close enough." said the devil man. "He's doing fine."

At that point, Bandages crashed again into a nearby house.

"I bet nothing of this would have happened if I still had my talisman." grumbled his voice from under the rubble. "Guys, if you have any great ideas, this is the time."

"We have one idea," suggested carefully Yamcha, running to him as he freed himself from the remains of wood and concrete. "We're not sure if it's great. Do you think we could manage to come close enough to grab and squeeze his tail?"

"Hah. That's the plan? Maybe."

He dusted himself off and coughed out some plaster.

"Good news is, I think he's still in there somewhere," said Bandages. "At the beginning he was just flailing at me without technique, like a wild beast. But then he started being more focused. Stopped wrecking random shit and concentrated on me. He used some moves I could recognize, even re-enacted a bit of our fight from yesterday."

"So you think he could regain control over himself while in that state?" Spike looked incredulous. "I am ashamed for not thinking of it - that would be perfect. What's the bad news?"

"Well, it's that he's getting better." concluded the mummy. "Good luck sneaking up on him now."

The burns had been painful, so painful. And now the computer had been destroyed. It was not a physical feeling, but it still was as if a huge chunk of Puar had been cut out of him. This time he knew it would not come back, and he did not know how could he possibly do without now. He wanted to kill the girl. He needed to kill her. It would make Yamcha happy. Would it? Where was Yamcha anyway now? No matter. He had ideas. So many ideas so so many they hurt his head because they just pushed and pushed and wanted to get out. A thing that had a lot of very deadly things. How was it made again? Puar could not recall, could not remember. It has just been right there and now it was gone. Like that other thing, and that spherical one. Not ideas, chunks of ideas, fragments. The vital parts, gone. A jumble of thoughts without structure. His brain on its own felt heavy, slow, dumb.

Puar hissed in frustration. He would do with what he had. He would get it done.

Kill the girl.
Caroline was destroyed, her parents were in the relative security of the panic room, and Bulma now knew it was time for the final confrontation. It wasn't a nice thought. Being together with her parents had given her some comfort - she had a relatively straightforward objective to try to achieve, and her mind was busy worrying for them. Now however it was only her and her enemy, and she had no delusions how it would have to end. When she had been shot by Mai she didn't expect it. But this, this was it. A fight to the death. The first time she felt something that Goku, like any warrior, must have felt many times; the knowledge that a single mistake, a stroke of bad luck, or even just her own fundamental inferiority would be her undoing and spell the end for her.

She had no idea how anyone took it for long without going crazy.

It helped a bit that she was angry. She was livid. She was afraid for herself, but if one thing did not burden her, it was any shred of pity or compassion for her enemy. He had gone so far that he had forever lost that privilege. But even had it not been so, realistically, she could not fathom any possible way to end this threat that didn't involve killing Puar. A pity, because he would have been an interesting study subject, but that was neither here nor there. Right now, the issue was how more than if.

She needed a plan, and she realised she didn't really have one. That wasn't good. She patrolled the corridor of the basement, gun in hand, painfully aware of her own vulnerability, as now she had lost most of the protective clothing she wore earlier. She had found some other garments in one of the labs, but she was sure Puar could cut through those if he really tried, and latex gloves that only offered the flimsiest of protections. The uncomfortable feeling of being naked, at the mercy of forces outside her control, would not leave her.

The question on which her life hinged was how much had Puar been wounded until now, how close he was to his limit, whether he realised it or not. Oolong had mentioned that damage translated into a loss of energy when transforming, and Puar had been almost killed twice already that night. How many would be enough?

She didn't know. She just walked with her back to the wall, kept an eye on any vents, and hoped that she wasn't missing some tiny crack in the concrete through which she could be stabbed in her back. Racking her head, thinking, how would he try to attack, how would he get her to lower her guard, from what angle would he come next time, and would it be the last thing she'd ever see. "Bulma..."

Her heart sank. She knew that voice, but she had never heard it so full of pain. She didn't expect this.

This wasn't part of the equation, not any more.

"Mom?" she called, her voice trembling, and turned around.

Panchy dragged herself towards her. She was standing by leaning on the wall. Her clothes were tattered, ripped, bloody. One of her legs hung limply, bent in an unnatural direction. She was bruised. She was crying.

"He got inside." whispered the woman, sobbing.

Bulma felt the blood drain from her face. A horrible feeling like being naked and alone in the cold vacuum of space.

"I don't know how, but he got inside."

It couldn't be. She had left them in a safe place. He couldn't sink this low.

"Your father is..."
"Mom!" screamed Bulma, and lowering her gun, she ran towards her.

_How would he get her to lower her guard._

One moment before she was close enough to hug her mother, Bulma stopped. A different type of chill ran through her body.

Slowly, she raised her gun again. Her eyes were ice cold.

She pointed it in between her mother's eyes.

"Bulma?" the woman whispered, scared, with a broken voice.

"Tell me," said Bulma, calmly, "what happened during the party for my ninth birthday?"

"What?" her eyes were lost. "Bulma, didn't you hear me? Your father..."

"What. Happened. During the party for my ninth birthday." hissed the girl.

"Bulma, what are you saying, I don't reme-"

The shot pierced her forehead and splattered in blood the wall behind her. Panchy screamed, a voice that was a shrieking mix of her own and another, thinner, more child-like, and _angry_. Despite the bullet that had destroyed her brain, she did not fall. She scrambled onwards, her body dragging itself, broken, twitching, losing colour rapidly, her eyes bloodshot, her mouth drooling, a thin line of blood dripping down her face from the hole above her eyes.

"YOU BASTARD!" screamed Bulma. "HOW DARE YOU!"

She shot again, once, twice, into the mother-creature's chest. It shrieked again. Then it exploded in a cloud of smoke, and Bulma knew it was time to run.

More pain. More poison. More fangs and teeth. All he remembered. All he could think of. All at once.

The nightmare behind her was growing, growing, transforming continuously into an ever angrier, ever deadlier mass. An _excessive_ mass. Puar's strength remained the same, but his body was heavier, which made him slow. Slow enough for a seventeen year old girl to outrun him, reach a chemistry laboratory, enter, lock the door behind her.

It did not stop.

A slimy creature started pouring in from under the door. There was no structure anymore, no logic, no efficiency - every transformation was just focused towards one thing, just a crude sketch, a biological mashup of tissues and functions without coherence, a cancerous mass more than an organism. The slime was like the flesh of a jellyfish, and before it could change again, Bulma grabbed a jar of an hygroscopic salt and dropped its contents on it. It shrivelled and hissed and changed again. And again, she ran. There was a beaker full of acid, she tossed it behind her, she didn't stop to watch the effects but was happy to hear another scream, smell the seared flesh. She passed a tank full of liquid helium, toppled it, then left the laboratory through another door, locking it right behind her as the claws of a wolf-like beast, covered in frostbite burns, tried to reach her.

How much still?
The internal doors connected the various laboratories; now she was in the one where it all begun, right in front of the massive half-sphere of the ki scanner, still open since the day before. She tossed as many things as she could in front of the door behind her; furniture, cans, raw materials lying around. There was a drum of oil, she poured it on the ground, then tossed a glass panel to shatter on it too. She didn't have time or materials for any kind of sophisticated trap, so she just desperately grasped for every item that looked like it could produce some harm, anything.

There were no more laboratories - from here she could only go back to the corridor, without weapons or tools. Here she would make her last stand.

Bulma reloaded the gun with the last cartridge she had on her, she grabbed a fire extinguisher and a torch burner to her side, turned the computer's monitor towards the scanner and positioned herself right in the centre of the hemisphere, turning the machine on. She increased the sensitivity to the maximum. No matter what form Puar assumed, he would still be emitting his magic's signature radiation. As soon as he'd get inside the scanner's radius, he would turn up on the screen bright as the sun, which would give her at least a chance to spot him and react.

Bulma gripped her gun, one eye on the door, the other on the screen. And on the screen she saw herself. She didn't expect it - had never tried yet. But there she was, thanks to the amplified sensitivity of the machine, her own body's outline, faint but unmistakable. A weave of thin luminous thread twisting through her body, carrying her own, tiny amounts of spiritual energy from her spine to everything else. She could see it move as she reacted to every noise - zooming around to her ears, then down her arm, to her fingers, the index ready to squeeze the trigger. Without even being voluntary, she had been doing this for all her life, and so had probably everyone else. And seeing it made her more conscious of it - when she felt a shiver, a moment of tension, when her senses got sharper to react to the danger, she could connect those things with her own ki swirling around, reaching the right places, activating the right cells.

It would have been all very fascinating if not for the fact that she would probably die there without ever getting a chance to tell anyone else.

"Where is Yamcha?" said a voice, suddenly. She looked around, but couldn't see anything. This must be Puar's true voice - his body transformed in something too small or too well hidden to see.

"I can't... remember." said the voice again, at first with a hint of suffering, then in an ever angrier and more hysterical crescendo. "You must tell me! You know!"

Never let it be said that Bulma Briefs would pass an opportunity.

"Perhaps I do." she said, with a smile. "Funny you would forget."

"IT'S YOUR FAULT!" shrieked Puar. Where was he? Somewhere in front of her, she was sure. "The computer. I was relying... I can't remember. I know Yamcha's here. He was here. He was with you earlier. WHERE IS YAMCHA?"

Keep him angry, but interested, not so angry to kill you...

"I told him to go do something for me." she answered. "Who knows, I might tell you. If you ask kindly enough."

"I'LL KILL YOU!" screamed Puar.

"Then why should I tell you?" Bulma shrugged. "Maybe you want to take me alive."

The scanner didn't show much except for a vague, diffuse brightness. Unfortunately, its design meant
that only a close enough object would appear properly in focus.

"You don't want to be taken alive," hissed the other. "I'll do this, and then that. If only I could remember..."

"Let's get this over with," said the girl, bluntly. "You can't kill me, or you'll never know the fate of your beloved Yamcha. You can't turn into anything too big, or I'll fill you with bullets, or set you on fire, and I know you hate that. Nor can you turn into anything too small - you never did yet, for good reason. You wouldn't be able to move freely, or even see me. Bacteria are at the mercy of air currents and random molecular motions. There's only so much you can do. Do it, and let's see who wins this."

She wished she was really that confident, but still - wounded, confused, angry, and forced to fight on her own home turf: Puar wouldn't get any weaker than this. It was all or nothing.

Bulma figured he'd try to sting her. As she had reminded him, mostly to put the idea in his head, the ideal size for an attack now was that of an insect, which would also be the minimum one at which he could secrete enough of a toxin to paralyse her or put her to sleep. So, this would be like those times in summer when mosquitos tried to sting her and she did her best to swat them away. Except for the bit where if she got stung even once, she'd be captured, probably tortured, and then killed by this insane creature.

She drew a deep breath. She focused. Like killing a mosquito. Like playing a video game. She thought of those times when she'd feel fast, reactive, in flow, while doing those things. When it was like time slowed down and she couldn't miss a hit. She tried to summon back to her that feeling.

In the scanner's screen, her body became slightly brighter. Her eyes lit up.

She did not expect this, but now Bulma could see on the screen the tiniest fluctuations of her energy, and she realised she could will them around. Her perception dilated. Her focus sharpened. The better her senses connected her with the here and now, the better she could judge the way the ki flowed in her from the scanner's image; and thus, the better she could control it, improving her senses' reach yet again. It was really that simple, once you got the gist of it, she realised, fascinated. As simple as thinking.

And then for an instant it exploded. Time stood still. Space expanded to infinity. It was like everything else was frozen, and she alone could move in the entire world. And down, in the corner of the screen, slithering from under a space between two panels of the scanner...

"Gotcha." said Bulma.

Her hands bolted to grab the hornet - or the thing resembling a hornet, at least. The spell broke, time got back to normal, but now the creature was her prisoner, grasped between her hands, squirming, shrieking...

She ran. Slammed open the chemistry laboratory's door, all while squeezing the thing in her hands, repressing her disgust as she felt it creak and give way under her fingers and it screamed, screamed with a voice that resembled way too much that of a little girl. But she needed to keep it in pain, distracted, unable to think or transform again.

She reached the laboratory's blast furnace, threw the thing inside, slammed the door shut, and turned the heat on, to the maximum temperature it could reach.

Puar's flesh was crumpled, crushed, stabbed by shards of his own cracked exoskeleton, but he finally
managed to find the clarity he needed to transform again. He was inside some kind of container. The walls appeared to be made of a hard mineral substance, except for a thick glass window. The restraints on his strength were valid when transforming too - he could not become anything bigger than the space he was in, or he would just crush himself. So he picked a simple enough form, small but deadly, a cobra snake with some modifications. The girl was outside, he could see her from the glass window. It was just a matter of finding a large enough fissure, sliding through, reaching her. She couldn't run forever.

The container got hot. The temperature was raising quickly. Puar wouldn't have worried much if it was just a matter of discomfort of his body - he had gone through worse pain tonight - but it was getting at the point where it would actually cause some damage. The snake's skin started drying up. His blood passed the boiling point. He could not keep this up.

He transformed into an inanimate thing, a small robot, or his idea of it. He had wheels and metal claws. The tire's rubber started melting off. He changed again, and again, every time replacing a component. Now the tin of the soldering was melting, circuit boards were crumpling up. It was then that Puar realised the danger of the trap he was inside. If he couldn't transform back to leave, as long as the temperature was so high, all he could become was something inanimate - a rock, or a block of metal hardy enough to not melt. He could survive endlessly in that form, but he also wouldn't be able to do anything. He would be effectively trapped.

Yet he remembered - he still retained that much knowledge - that there was another possibility. Things so small they could pass through anything. So simple, they couldn't break down, because they had nothing to break down into. So light and fast, the girl would never be able to catch them.

He had never gone so deep, so far from the ordinary realm. Never pushed his magic that much, not even imagined it. It did not matter. All that mattered was that there was a barrier between him and the human being he needed to get at all costs; the one who knew; the one who could reunite him with Yamcha. Nothing else was worth a single thought.

After all, he would do anything to make him happy.

With a last explosion of smoke, Puar transformed into a neutrino.

When she saw the smoke inside the oven, and nothing afterwards, Bulma finally knew it was over. Either for Puar, or for her, if he could survive even this. Puar had never taken notice of his limits - how his magic was supposed to recharge based on his own body mass. But he had burned a lot of it tonight, and now he had surely seen that his only way out was to become something so infinitely tiny, even his incredible recovery rate couldn't keep up.

Oolong said he didn't know what happened to those who met that fate. Bulma hoped they just passed on. Because otherwise she'd have to live with the knowledge that from now on, out of all the subatomic particles that made up the entire universe, one of them would have a sentient mind, trapped forever, hating her for a fate infinitely worse than death. Perhaps even worse than Hell.

She felt faint and dropped on the floor. A quick glance at her glove revealed it was pierced, and there was a drop of blood on her skin - the sting had reached her, after all. She hoped he really had taken her bait about keeping her alive, then drifted off, and her mind slipped into darkness.

The giant monkey screamed to the sky and beat his chest with his fists. Cars burned, long columns of dark smoke rose towards the sky. Screams echoed, alarms went off, guns shot. It was chaos. Yet the city looked up, to the sky, and in the sky had found hope. They knew they would be saved, because
someone was protecting them.

Swinging across buildings with his bandages, zooming, jumping, a man wrapped entirely in white headed obstinately towards the monster. He was beaten up, bloody, but did not surrender. Punched back, he stood up; smashed to the ground, he rose into the air again.

"It's the mummy man!" screamed a voice among the crowd.

Following him was another - slender, purple, with a pair of horns on his head. He had wings but he didn't fly. Rather, he jumped from roof to roof, occasionally pivoting against a skyscraper's side to propel himself.

"It's the devil man!" screamed another voice.

Someone, walking on the ground, pushed and tried to get ahead in the crowd. He apologised for his rudeness, said something about catching up to his friends. He was asked if he felt okay, his face was really pale. At a moment's notice, he jumped up in the air, exploded, and transformed into a bat, flying off into the distance.

"It's the... bat man?" suggested someone.

Somehow, that felt very underwhelming.

"Please, calm down and walk towards the city centre!" shouted a man from the top of a nearby store. His silhouette alone showed against a bright sign. "We have everything under control! The creature is being directed towards the financial district, where the office buildings are empty. Please move calmly, there is no danger if you follow our instructions."

"Who are you?" asked one of the people below.

The man stepped forward. A long mane of black hair swung around his body. His confident smile shone like a diamond.

"My name," he said, "is Yamcha."

"Yamcha from the West City Dinos?" continued the voice, perplexed.

The boy nodded. "The very same."

"Yamcha from the sex scandal that involved the daughter of..."

"I have to go now. My companions need me." he said, as his eyes gazed into the distance. "Just keep calm and follow my instructions."

He zoomed away, leaving unanswered the many questions of the crowd. As he had mentioned, Goku was being slowly drawn towards the financial district. It wasn't just a matter of containing damage - Bandages had judged that the terrain there would be more favourable. Most buildings were taller than Goku's current form, so they could provide vantage points and cover for surprise attacks. Yamcha considered that Bulma's company would most likely have to foot the bill for any collateral damage and didn't feel like she'd be very happy of this, but it wasn't the most pressing worry at the moment. The army's tanks were less than ten minutes away.

"Yamcha, good timing!" screamed Bandages, hanging from a window. "We're about to try something, we need a third man. And Fangs and See-Through are useless for this."
The other landed on the roof of the same building. "What's the plan?"

"I thought we could grab his tail if one of us distracted him while the other attacked him from behind, but turns out that doesn't work." explained the mummy. "He's gotten too smart for that; whenever we try it he backflips and slaps away the second attacker without giving enough of an opening to the first. So we want to double down."

"A third attacker?"

"That's the idea. You up for it?"

Yamcha sighed. "Sure, why not? It's not like I ever made plans to live until old age."

"Don't be a wimp. I got slapped around by Goku a bit, y'know. You can take it. He's strong but he's also a big slow beast."

"If you say so."

"Great! Go meet up with Spike, you're Team Tail. I'll go get that big boy's attention."

"You know," said the other, "you seem to be enjoying yourself."

Bandages grinned. "Long time since I got this beat. Can't wait to dish it back with interest."

They split. Yamcha reached Spike and he had the plan explained. Bandages would draw Goku across a street in between two tall skyscrapers, narrow enough that he would have difficulty turning around. Spike would try to grab his tail from below, and when Goku dodged by jumping, that would be the time for Yamcha's attack, from above. It seemed a good plan, and he agreed to carrying it out. He got on top of the designated building, while Spike was hiding at street level. Goku was still a couple blocks ahead, but steadily coming closer.

"Oh, hey, Yamcha."

He looked around. He was alone on the roof.

"What are you doing here, See-Through?" he asked. "Also, why are you still naked?"

"I couldn't find any clothes. Got used to it at this point." explained the invisible man. "I was just dropped here by Bandages early. I'm afraid I can't help much at this point, so I'll just stay put."

"Well, but I'm not sure this is the best place for... oh, dang, he's coming!"

Bandages must have been really good at pissing off Goku, because he was running full speed now, stomping cars and leaving his footprints in the asphalt. He extended an arm to grab the mummy, and Yamcha thought he was done for, but Bandages pulled one of his wraps and used it to accelerate laterally faster than his feet would have allowed, dodging the hand at the last moment. The giant monkey's momentum led him to spin around trying to pursue, which made him slap his tail in the opposite direction, towards a small side street.

Spike jumped out, aiming for Goku's tail with a horizontal jump. The only sure way to avoid him for the monster was to go up. He used his left hand, that was going after Bandages, to push hard against the ground. With an agility that no one would have expected of a giant primate, Goku shifted to a handstand, lifting his entire body up, and swinging his tail upwards.

Yamcha launched himself at maximum speed from the side of the building. The tail was right in front
of him, Goku's equilibrium was precarious, there was no way he could dodge him. And in fact, he
didn't. "WATCH OUT!" screamed See-Through. But his reflexes weren't fast enough to help
anyone in such a battle. It was all over before he could finish his warning - Goku's tail didn't avoid
Yamcha, it simply ran towards him at full speed, slapping him frontally. Yamcha's body was
slammed against the building.

The giant monkey jumped up and straightened himself up with a somersault. Then he grasped the
edge of the building on which See-Through stood and pulled himself up. As if he had perceived
where the last attack had come from, he scrutinized the roof, looking all over it. His giant head turned
around, and the man felt a warm breath caress his body. Bandages, Spike and Yamcha were all
down, in the road, trying to regroup, and See-Through was there, alone with the monster. For a
moment he felt a jolt of irrational fear that he would somehow be exposed to the eyes of the creature,
that they could see through his invisibility. When Goku's eyes immediately moved on, the fear
completely drained out of him, and was replaced by a sense of relief and exhilaration. Don't be stupid
- you're invisible! There's no danger!

Approximately at that moment, having truly, completely relieved himself of fear for the first time
after almost twenty years, See-Through became visible again.

He blinked. The now unfamiliar feeling of having opaque eyelids confused him.

And Goku, for all his being a very clever kid underneath, also happened to be a massive and not
especially smart primate at the moment. Which meant he reacted to a naked man suddenly appearing
in front of his eyes out of nowhere just as well as any monkey would have - with bafflement,
confusion, and then scrambling to react by grabbing the new threat.

Which led him to lose his grip on the building's edge.

"NOW!" screamed Spike, Bandages and Yamcha, having the same idea at the same time. Three men
from three different angles ran towards Goku's tail. There was no direction in which to move to
avoid them all. Before he even touched ground, the three had a firm grasp on it.

"HEAVE, HO!"

They all pulled and swung. Goku did not have time to land straight - rather, his whole body weight
was slammed violently against the road. He tried to pull away, but the three started squeezing, and
planted their feet into the asphalt to resist.

"He's getting weaker!" roared Bandages. "We can do this!"

The monster fell, screamed angrily. He moved his arms, trying to find something to grab, something
to use as a weapon, to smash.

His fingers closed against the trailer of an abandoned truck.

Goku didn't like anger. Anger made him do things he regretted. Anger made him make mistakes.
And anger had made him kill his grandpa.

So, even completely lost in a sea of blinding, all-encompassing anger against anything and
everything that existed, his mind still experienced a pang of discomfort. So deep was his dislike for
this sentiment that he couldn't avoid to feel like something was wrong with anything he did. Yet this
feeling couldn't express itself in anything more than anger as well.

He wanted to smash it all, sure. The lights, the city, the rocks, the cars, these annoying people that
kept punching him, the ones who kept firing at him, the ones who didn't do anything but exist. But the more time passed, the more he also wanted to smash the fact that he wanted to smash those things, smash his anger, that fucking Moon, smash himself, smash any and all things that made him be like this.

And more than anything...

"Careful!" screamed Yamcha. "He's got a weapon now!"

Goku lifted the trailer up in his right hand, prepared to hit with it. The three warriors wondered for one instant if they should renounce their progress, let the tail go and save at least themselves, but it was clear soon enough that they weren't the target. Instead, when the monkey's hand came down, it fell violently on the base of his own tail.

Bandages was perplexed. "What's he doing?"

The trailer went up and down again. Now its metallic base was dripping blood, and Goku's tail had a visible wound at its base.

"He's trying to cut off his own tail!" said Spike, fascinated.

"Hey, no joking!" said the other. "He does that, we lose our hold on him. Squeeze stronger!"

Goku roared with pain at that, but he didn't desist. Again, and again, and again the now contorted metal of the vehicle fell. The muscle teared and the bone started cracking.

"We can't let him!" screamed Bandages. "Everybody, pull while it's still strong enough! Let's slam him against the building!"

And so the three of them pulled. The monkey screamed, the grasp surely getting much more painful due to the pitiful condition his tail was in now. They pulled stronger, he screamed more, they started a swing, and suddenly it was all very easy, as if their opponent had gotten lighter, as if swinging him around was no effort at all.

When they looked at what they were swinging, it was just a tail ending in a stump.

But before they could decide to retreat and come up with a new plan, an amazing transformation started to happen. The monster shrunk and lost his fur. His roar turned into a whimper. The three men dropped the amputated tail and ran to the body, that was now only three or four meters tall.

"I couldn't possibly imagine." whispered Spike. "It would have been so easy, had we known..."

"This doesn't make sense." grumbled Bandages. "It's a weak point, and he reverts if you rip it off?"

"He transforms into a giant monkey with the full Moon, Bandages." sighed Yamcha. "Nothing about it makes sense."

In front of them, sleeping huddled on the ground in a fetal position, was a naked kid. Goku, now looking perfectly human, except for a little brown stump right above the cleft of his buttocks.

Yamcha took off his shirt and wrapped him in it, then picked him up in his arms. The rumbling sound of the army's tanks was getting closer.

"Come on," he said. "We're going back home."
When Bulma came to her senses, the first thing she checked was that there were no clouds, demonic clerks, or seas of yellow clouds. Instead all she saw in front of her was the familiar environment of her own bedroom. She was still alive. That was good.

The second thing was wondering what had happened with everything else, and how had she been brought there. Next to her bed were towels, a bucket of water and one containing other fluids she'd rather not indulge on. She had been cared for, while passed out.

"You're awake!"

Bulma longed for the comfort of seeing a familiar face. Which made it even more disappointing when the man who walked up to her was someone she'd absolutely never seen in her life.

"Who the hell are you and why are you in my bedroom?" she asked.

"Oh, sorry for that. I'm See-Through." explained the not-invisible-anymore man. "I'll go call the others."

"Ok." the girl blinked, dumbfounded. "I guess a lot happened."

One minute later, the man came back. With him were Yamcha, Goku, and most importantly...

"Mom! Dad!"

Panchy and Dr. Briefs ran to hug their daughter, still in bed. With their help, she got up and went to greet the others.

"Are you fine?" asked Bulma. "What happened to you?"

"We're alright," confirmed her dad. "Nothing really. We were locked inside the panic room until Yamcha here came to break us out."

Yamcha nodded. "When we came back, the entire place was locked. We just broke through the doors and found you all."

"That was incredibly reckless!" screamed Bulma. "What if I had not gotten rid of Puar? You could have helped him escape!"

"But you had gotten rid of him, right?" objected the boy, defensive. "And if you would have rather died suffocating in your own-"

"No, thanks. It's fine." the thought was way too disturbing to consider. "That bad, huh?"

"You were comatose. Nothing that should have caused permanent damage, but you wouldn't have survived without a bit of care."

"Yeah, you're right. Thanks, I guess. Still a stupid thing to do though." Bulma sighed. "Do you want to know how I did it, by the way?"

The other looked uncomfortable. "I don't know. Perhaps it's better if I don't."

"Fair enough." she turned to Goku. "And you, country boy! I see they did just fine bringing you back to your senses! Everything all right?"

Goku smiled faintly. "Well, no one died," he said, "so that's good. Also, I don't have a tail any more."
"Oh, you're right! And no deaths, so I suppose you were kept out of the city, and no one noticed?" she trailed off hopefully.

There was an embarrassed silence. Spike and Fangs, who had just walked in, looked at each other and at their companions, then after a quick silent negotiation they seemingly agreed that the leader of the group should explain this.

"Not exactly," said Spike, finally. "Goku's curse was extremely powerful, far more than we could possibly anticipate, and-"

Bulma's face drained of colour. "How many people saw you?"

"Basically, everyone," explained Yamcha. "An entire residential neighbourhood in the north was completely razed. The financial district suffered some heavy damage."

"Honey, you must understand," intervened Dr. Briefs, "we're just getting scraps of information, right now, but the estimates are not good. We're talking the same numbers as a natural disaster. The army was involved too. Just the fighter jet that was destroyed costed, well, a lot."

"At least everyone's still alive." chimed in Panchy. "Your friends have really done well."

"I appreciate that. This could have gone much worse, I guess." she shook her head. "I'm sorry. I should have been far more careful. I suppose this means it's over for the Human Enhancement Program, right?"

"As much as I'd want it to be, because frankly, Bulma, that was plain irresponsible," said Dr. Briefs, with a judgemental stare, "I'm afraid not."

Bulma couldn't believe it. "Wait, what?"

"Apparently, because we're too damn good." said Yamcha, giggling.

"The King called." explained the doctor. "The news have spread that four extraordinary humans with incredible powers have defended the population of West City on this calamitous night. Yamcha was a famous face already and was recognized immediately. Then someone who had taken the job interview remembered they had seen him here. In no time, the connection was made and now basically everyone thinks Capsule Corporation created a team of heroes able to defend us from supernatural or alien threats. Which, incidentally, is exactly what your intention was, except for the part where we also caused the threat to begin with."

Even as happy as she was to hear that the project wasn't cancelled, this part made her stomach churn. Even though her main sin was just carelessness, she still had endangered the city, because of it. "That doesn't sound right."

"It isn't." admitted her father. "But what should I have done? I wouldn't have wanted you jailed, perhaps lynched, because of a mistake in good faith. And poor Goku would have had it worst of all while deserving none of it. So, I went along with it all. I lied, said we didn't know anything about the giant monkey creature, but that we were indeed working on enhancing the human potential. That it was an experimental thing. Well, not any more. The King has said he wholeheartedly supports the program that created the heroes who saved West City."

"So we have..."

"We have the Crown's funding and support." Dr. Briefs frowned. "But I turned down any money for now, and in fact suggested that our company should help with reconstruction. It's the least we can
do. However, shutting down the program is not an option any more. If anything, we'll have to produce results and present them to the King from now on."

Bulma nodded and sat down, a bit stunned. She didn't really feel like she should complain - this had all resolved way better than it probably should have. Still, she couldn't avoid the feeling that this wouldn't be entirely *her* research any more now that the eyes of the world were pointed on it. But it would have been a silly thing to object to when she could have easily ended up destitute, in jail, or dead.

Suddenly, everyone's attention was grabbed by Bandages, who rushed into the room looking very excited. "Guys!" he screamed. "Good news!"

"Someone with the power to erase everyone's memories of the last 24 hours has appeared?" asked Bulma.

"What? No!" he said. "I found my talisman!"

And he showed a small stone tablet with something etched on it. Everyone outside of Bulma and her parents groaned audibly.

"What is it?" asked Bulma, leaning forward to take a better look at it.

"A fragment from the ruins near our old village." explained the man. "Got it back then, always carry it around for good luck, but yesterday Goku made me lose it. And guess what happened."

"I'm sorry for all that happened and my part in it," Goku was contrite, but then added with a hint of annoyance, "but I really don't think that was the cause."

"I would not take the possibility lightly." said Spike, solemnly. "The ruins are one of the places where the Other Side most powerfully resonates with our world. Legends say that they are haunted by the remains of an ancient force buried underneath them. That symbol is why those like us are called 'Witched' in those parts."

Bulma frowned, confused. "Witched? What does it have to do with this symbol?"

"You're looking at it upside down." explained Fangs.

"Oh, I see."

She made a mental note that at some point in the future, when there would be enough time and resources, maybe these ruins were worth sending a team to look into. However, even if they could historically and archaeologically interesting, she strongly doubted Spike's rambling explanation made much sense. Why would any ancient civilization use the same alphabet and language as modern people, to begin with? And even then it wasn't clear why the symbol would be considered a letter W.

To her, who couldn't get rid any more of her obstinate first impression, that looked rather like a curly, ornate M.

Leaving the Solar System didn't make much of a difference in view. The first reason was that, of course, unless you aimed very precisely, most of the Solar System was desolate, empty vacuum anyway. The second was that anyway, without eyes or other sensory organs, the tiny particle couldn't see anything. Nor could it interact with photons at all, for that matter. Nothing could disturb it in its infinite loneliness. Most particles of the same kind didn't suffer much for it. This one did, though.
Unable to stop, unable to crash onto anything, die, turn back, see, or do anything other than think, Puar travelled on, as every second that passed took him thousands of kilometres further away from the only person he ever loved.
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter 17 - The 36th sponsor of shaolin

West City Gazette, April 15, 750

The question of our times, by Hank Firecracker

[...] Since that fateful February night in which our city was attacked, we have learned to look at the world with new eyes. We have witnessed and received notice of prodigies; and a slow stream of information disclosed by the research division of Capsule Corporation has convinced even the most stubborn sceptics that there is indeed something more than tricks and able marketing to their claims. Superhumans do exist, and they walk among us. Sometimes, they do more.

I have received many letters from readers claiming that they had met such people. Most of the times, I have dismissed them as nonsense or pranks. However, this morning our newspaper received a slew of different accounts of the same episode: a bank where, during a robbery, the well-known former baseball player Yamcha [...] would have put down three criminals with little effort and, apparently, even caught bullets mid-air. You will find the story covered in depth in our news section; [...] suffice to say, there are enough witnesses for me to believe this happened for real.

The extraordinary soon becomes ordinary in our minds, given enough time to settle. Sometimes, even two mere months can be enough for that, making us accept things that until then we would have considered outrageous. And yet, with this adaptability comes a downside: that we risk losing perspective about how revolutionary a single change, a single moment can be. Make no mistake, I believe that right now we're going through a series of events that will redefine the very meaning of human existence. We, living in this city, find ourselves right at the epicentre of a revolution, with reason to be both proud and scared. But even in this dazzling, exhilarating atmosphere it is frustrating to know that we're still only mere spectators. The question, the one that we should all ask ourselves, and ask out loud, to those who can answer it, the only question that matters right now is: what, exactly, is Bulma Briefs doing?

"Can you please relax that strap a bit? I swear, my arm's gonna wither and fall off for lack of blood."

The experiment setup looked disturbingly like some sort of torture device. It was a reclining padded armchair, with needles and electrodes sticking out of it especially along the back area and in the neck support, and Bulma was tied to it arms and legs. An array of monitors and sensors controlled all possible variables of interest - from Bulma's own heart rate and EEG to every contraction of every single muscle in her body. Yamcha and Goku were helping her with the set up process, while her other subjects watched from afar, with some apprehension.

"Are you sure about going ahead with this?" asked Goku, while loosening up a bit the straps. "I think with some more meditation you could..."

Bulma rolled her eyes. "I've had it of meditation!"

"You tried it only for a couple of days," pointed out Goku.
"Yes, and it obviously doesn't work for me. All I could think of was how much faster it would have been to do it this way."

"You're not supposed to think anything," the boy said. "That's the point."

"Look, I just want to feel that sensation again!" she exclaimed. "It's the way forward for this project. I was there, I got it, I was sure I did! But it escapes me now, I don't know how. I just can't grasp it. This is the only way I can try."

Goku shook his head. What Bulma had described feeling during the last moments of her battle with Puar was certainly something he was familiar with - and combined with her observations on the scanner, he had little doubt she had managed to draw on her own ki for power and sharpness of senses, even if certainly she hadn't even come close to what he or another professional martial artist like Yamcha could do. But what one can do in a moment of stress and heightened attention due to deadly danger isn't easily reproduced in more normal conditions, and that was true even for him.

"I still think you could do it in a safer way." he concluded. "You just need to work harder on it."

"This is safe. Enough." said the girl. "And I'm Bulma Briefs, I don't work hard for things. I build machines that do them for me."

Goku stared at her. "Bulma, to build this machine you didn't sleep for the last two nights."

"Yes, but that work is fun. Now let's cut this discussion, I need to relax for the experiment."

Yamcha finished taking care of his side of the bindings that kept the girl in place on the chair and went to sit at the computer terminal that controlled the apparatus.

"So," he asked, "how does this work?"

"Well, those displays are monitoring my neural activity," explained Bulma. "From brain, to spinal cord, and peripheral nerves. The others, the ones that are basically flatlining for now, record my ki output. Now what you're supposed to do is stimulate artificially my nervous system with the signal that I programmed - which is a synthesis of the ones I recorded from you all during physical activity, minus or plus some individual differences..."

"I don't think I can do that," objected the boy. He was still looking for which of the three keyboards connected to the machine controlled the main screen.

"Bulma, do you want me to do it?" asked Goku.

"No, I want you next to me. For safety."

He frowned. "You said this was safe."

"It is. If you stay next to me. You see me jerk too much, keep my body in place. Yamcha, basically you just have to click that Activate button when the warning above it is green. The machine will zap me with a small electric discharge straight to my spinal cord which should stimulate artificially a release of my ki. Easy peasy, you don't need to think about the details."

"All right." the other nodded. He had just found both the button and the right keyboard. "The warning's yellow right now. What does it mean?"

"It means my muscles are too tensed up," explained Bulma. "Give me a second."
She closed her eyes, took a deep breath. Then another. Slowly, the numbers tracking the contraction of her muscles went down, until finally the label on the screen changed colour.

"Green!" shouted Yamcha. "I'm going!"

There was a click, the lines on all the screens zigzagged wildly, and immediately after a crack and a scream.

"OUCH! MY ARM!"

Six hours, a race to the hospital, and a plaster later, a rather disgruntled Bulma without the use of her left hand was sitting on a sofa in the living room, facing her parents. Goku and Yamcha had tagged along as witnesses to the incident.

"So," said Dr. Briefs, "what have we learned today about doing science responsibly and safely?"

Bulma groaned and dumped her face into a pillow.

"Stubborn as ever." the man sighed. "And I would have thought that the incident two months ago would have been enough to teach you that lesson for good."

"It did teach me something." objected the girl. "That I shouldn't bet other people's lives on my mistakes. Hence, I took the risk myself. It was... calculated."

"Bulma, you broke your arm in three points under your own strength. That's impressive in its own way, but doesn't sound very calculated. What if the same happened to your spine? Or neck?"

"It couldn't have-"

Both her parents and Goku stared at her.

"Fine. It could." she admitted. "But you know how it is with things now. We need progress. Everyone is looking at us, everyone is expecting us to do something, and all we've been able to do is just show off a bit of what Goku and the others could do anyway."

The doctor patted her shoulder. "You know, the King isn't that demanding. And he certainly wouldn't endorse you risking your own life for that."

Bulma nodded. "I know. But it's not him I'm worried about. It's a matter of pride, I guess. But I'm also crazy scared of someone else getting at all this stuff first."

"Bulma," chimed in her mother, "I may not understand much of what you're doing, but if there's one thing I know is that you're very clever. If you're doing this, and you have a headstart, I'm sure no one will be able to catch up."

"Mom, I'm glad you think that of me," said the girl, with a faint smile, "but you just don't get it. It's not that simple."

Dr. Briefs shook his head. "I'm half torn on this. On one hand, your mother's right. Not just because you're really good, but you also have all our resources and some of the best study subjects you could hope for. On the other, I realise this is a very big prize. And now it's out in the open, so someone's gonna be interested. Armies, criminals. Other martial artists who may feel like they'll be defrauded of a key advantage."

"Oh, wow." exclaimed Bulma, alarmed. "I hadn't even thought of those yet!"
"But it's not by killing yourself that you will solve the problem. In fact, if you had just done that, you'd have left us in a terrible spot!"

"And gave us a horrible heartbreak!" said Panchy, elbowing her husband.

"That too obviously, sorry, I was talking a bit in the larger perspective." mumbled the man. "But I would hope you'd care for that as well, yes."

"Believe me, I'm in no hurry to die." the girl sighed. "In fact, finding a way to delay that as much as possible is part of the reason why I'm doing this. But I feel so besieged by potential dangers I perhaps mix a bit my priorities."

Goku stepped forward. "If it comes to it, you still have us. Me at least. Even without technology I'm sure I can well protect you."

"Hey, you have me too, no need to ask!" exclaimed Yamcha "In fact, I feel on a bit of a heroic streak these days."

Bulma eyed him sideways, with a smirk. "I've read. I wouldn't want to tell you what to do in your free time, but since your actions will impact our image in the eyes of the public, can you guarantee that you will restrain yourself to at least not doing anything illegal or dangerous?"

"Oh, the robbery was super easy. No danger at all, those guys were slow. And it's a citizen's arrest if I don't hurt them. Basically community service. It's doing wonders for my public image!"

Panchy clapped her hands, suddenly cheerful. "Oh, I know, Bulma! You should make him a costume!"

Dr. Briefs suddenly appeared distraught, as if he really wished he'd be on the other side of the Earth. Bulma rolled her eyes. "Mom, please."

"What? Honey, you love superhero costumes, right? I remember at your ninth birthday you..."

"Mom!" said Bulma, and it somehow managed to sound like a deadly threat.

"Hey, now I'm curious." said Yamcha. "What happened on your ninth birthday?"

The house was in as good a shape as a place besieged by an army of one hundred and fifty children could possibly be; that is, not very good at all. All the best efforts of the two adults in charge of the party (effectively, only Panchy) had been barely enough to protect the holy sanctum that was the Cake.

The Cake was a majestic, multilayered, multiflavoured triumph of haute patisserie. It was as tall as any one of the kids who were wildly scurrying around it, waiting for the moment when they could wolf down on a piece of it. That moment had not yet arrived because the main, most troublesome kid, the one this whole event was supposed to be about, was nowhere to be seen.

"Honey," asked Panchy, coming close to her husband, who observed the scene with all the satisfaction of someone who hadn't done absolutely anything to contribute to its realisation, "do you know where's Bulma?"

"Bulma?" he said "Oh, maybe she's playing around with my present."

"Honey, what did I say about not giving Bulma her presents beforehand?"
"I know." the man bowed his head, apologetic. "But she'd have so much fun with it, and I was wondering... what could she possibly do that's so bad with a wearable capsule set?"

"Fear not, people of this city!"

The voice had come from above. Everyone turned their head up, to see a little girl standing on top of a library, her blue hair waving in the draft that came in from an open skylight.

"The bringer of Justice!" she screamed, striking an elaborate pose.

"Bulma, please, come down, that's dangerous!" shouted Panchy.

The kid pushed a button on a device looking much like a wristwatch and jumped, above the table, disappearing among a cloud of smoke.

"TRANSFORMATION! CAPSULE KAMEN!"

The cream, sponge, and chocolate sprayed up to a range of five meters all around as a perfectly suited little superhero landed in the middle of the table.

"Nothing happened." hissed Bulma, and Yamcha felt like inquiring further would not be wise.

Dr. Briefs coughed and cleared his voice. "To go back to our original topic, I think we should consider what went wrong in Bulma's experiment, and how to fix it. Proceeding, this time, in a safer manner," he concluded, with a meaningful look at his daughter.

She thought about it a moment. "The experiment, I think, was not a complete failure." she said. "The readings should show this, but it really was ki that gave me the strength to break my own arm. The problem wasn't that the idea didn't work, it was a matter of control. I unleashed, if anything, too much ki. And by the way - I feel exhausted, even now."

"You based the signal on us, right?" asked Goku. "That means it was too strong, maybe. Like, asking for one hundred when you could only handle five."

"I had thought of it, and tried to compensate for that." explained Bulma. "But I suppose it wasn't enough. Truth is, the main references I had were you, Yamcha, Spike and Bandages. And even Spike, who's the weakest of you all, still counts as several dozens of times stronger than any regular human. There's a big gap in the middle, and extrapolating through it isn't easy. Unfortunately it's not as simple as tuning the intensity; shape comes into it too, apparently. It's been giving me a headache."

"So what you would need," suggested the doctor, "is a big data set of complete measurements performed on a vast pool of ki users of a varied range of strengths, in order to properly calibrate the stimulator to only free an amount of ki that the target body can withstand?"

His daughter nodded. Both she and her father fell into a long silence, each thinking about possible solutions.

"Lots of martial artists... this makes me think of a dream I had tonight!" exclaimed Yamcha, suddenly. "I participated in the Tenkaichi Tournament, and there were hundreds of other fighters! And somehow I beat them all and won!"

Both the scientists turned to look straight at him.

"What?" asked the boy, confused. "What did I say?"
Papaya Island, Southern Ocean

Two days later

The wind was gently whistling through the palm trees, the sun shone bright upon the land, the sea gently caressed the beach, and Brother Wei was partaking in that periodic ordeal that was handling the financial side of the biggest martial arts tournament in the world. It would have been gruelling work for the most expert of fundraisers; for a monk belonging to an order that usually subsisted on alms collected from nearby villages by one brother with a bowl and a bell it was the closest they could possibly imagine to Hell (which made it an excellent way to purge one's mind of sinful temptations). The long list of the sums local businesses and private citizens, thirty five altogether, had been willing to donate to the cause of celebrating the peak achievements of human body and mind in that traditional event with a century of history added up to a pretty hefty total - in fact, had it been for any other purpose, it would have been enough to send Wei's head spinning. But this was the Tenkaichi Tournament; between buying equipment, repairing the ring and paying for basic lodgings and logistics for hundreds of martial artists gathering from all over the world, that sum was still almost one zero short of the necessary total. Tickets would help, of course, but they could not be relied upon too much - viewership had in fact been steadily declining in the last editions.

The other way to gain some margin was of course to slice off money from the prizes. Sadly, that tended to be a bad move in the long run - the competitors needed to pay for their own travel expenses, and the less money they could make out of it, the less motivated they were to show up at all. Therefore, lowering the prizes had resulted in an overall loss of quality of the fighters. Brother Wei was bitterly sad about how low the martial arts seemed to have sunk - that they should be practiced for money, and not for the sake of the edification of one's mind and body. Yet that was the spirit of the times. The most disgraceful example was perhaps the brother of the Crane Master, one of the greatest of all time, who now scoured the world as a killer for hire. The tournament's prizes, in their own way, served the noble purpose of keeping the best away from such wretched ways of life.

But the tournament prizes were also damn expensive. With a sigh, Brother Wei took his pencil to their entry in the balance and erased it with a single stroke, replacing it with a much smaller number.

That's when he heard the ruckus.

"Brother Qiang," he called, a slight irritation in his voice, jutting out of his cell, "even outside of such critical times, it would be more becoming of us to not taint the quiet of our temple."

"I'm sorry, Brother Wei," apologised the other, agitated, "but it's not us. Someone has arrived and has demanded to see you."

"See me?" the monk raised his eyebrows. "Tell the visitor to have patience. I will meet them when it is the time."

"We have told her." Brother Qiang's voice softened into a whimper. "She didn't listen."

"Where's this accountant?" resounded an imperious, yet distinctly girlish voice, through the temple's halls. "I have a great proposition for them - one that will solve all his problems!"

Brother Wei considered those words. On one hand, this visitor seemed to be rude beyond belief, and way too ready to wreak havoc on the peace that everyone at the temple so carefully cultivated. On the other, even a glimmer of hope of deliverance from his current troubles was enough to grab his
"Guide her to me," he decided, finally. "At least she'll be quiet and not disturb anyone else. I'll listen what she has to say and send her on her way."

Qiang bowed respectfully, then hurried to carry out the instructions. One moment later, a blue tornado stormed through the doors.

"I'm Bulma Briefs!" she announced, with a smile charming enough to undo a couple years worth of meditation to purge one's earthly passions. "And I've come to save you."

"Brother Wei. I don't know why you'd think I need saving." lied the monk, gesturing towards a low cushion for her to kneel in front of a small tea tray. "But please, accept my hospitality, and let me know what led you to this thought."

"Don't you now?" Bulma sat down, legs crossed, laying her plastered arm on one knee. "I read through the history of this little event you run here, the Tenkaichi Tournament. Very nice, but, I get the impression, going through a tough spot."

"Well..." Brother Wei gestured vaguely.

"Not many spectators any more."

"You could say..."

"Second rate contestants."

"That is a bit..."

"And of course, no sponsors."

"I wouldn't say that." replied Wei, annoyed, mostly by how fundamentally true every single thing she'd said was. "I was just going through our donors' list for this edition. Many generous people have helped us."

The girl smiled mischievously. "I'm sure of that. But is any of them as generous as me?"

The monk's eyes sparkled. "You intend to donate?"

"I intend to donate more than has ever been donated to all the previous editions, put together." she said. "But with a condition."

"We accept donations, not bribes." answered Wei, brusquely. "The fairness of the Tournament is not for sale."

"Oh, you misunderstand me. I, like you, am a patron of the martial arts. Though perhaps in a different way." Bulma dug into her shoulder bag and dragged out a small brochure titled *Capsule Corporation: Beyond the Human Potential*, handing it to Brother Wei. "See, what I'm looking for is fighters to observe and learn from. I am studying the martial arts... scientifically. What I was hoping for was that you could allow me to record data from the participants' performances, making it a condition for registration."

The monk quickly went through the brochure's content. He didn't get much of it, and he thought he needed to get someone with more experience than him in martial arts or science to evaluate it. Still, most of it seemed just full of awfully vague hints at prodigious discoveries to come. He wondered
whether it wasn't all just a publicity stunt. "Seems interesting." he said. "But is that truly all you would expect of us? What would your donation amount to?"

"Money for the biggest prize ever, plus multiple prizes for lower tiers. We want to draw a lot of fighters of all sorts, even the weaker ones need to feel like they have a shot at winning something." she started, counting on her fingers. "Then of course we'll take care of the marketing campaign - no offense, but simply handing fliers here on the island and relying on master-to-pupil word of mouth doesn't cut it - and we'll provide machinery and equipment for the entire elimination round, not to mention travel expenses for all fighters who need them."

Brother Wei was thoughtful. "This way we'll be flooded by people of all sorts." he noted. "From masters to complete novices."

"Of course, that's the objective." explained the girl. "We need to abate all barriers to participation so that we can have a sample as diverse as possible. Once the eliminatories are over, you'll still have only eight fighters standing for the public fights. But they'll be picked from a much larger pool."

"I need to discuss this with the other brothers." said the monk. "But the conditions do not sound unreasonable. And you will not register any fighters yourself?"

"I never said that." replied Bulma.

Brother Wei frowned. "Surely, you don't expect any favouritism? As I said..."

"Fear not, brother." she chuckled. "It will all be perfectly regular. They don't need any help to win everything themselves."

"Everything? Do you have any idea of what..."

"Oh, believe me, I do." she got up and gave a small bow, handing her business card. "I'll take my leave now, and will wait for your call. Not just for the money - if you want this tournament to be a real show, we have that in spades."

And she stormed out, leaving in her wake a bamboozled shaolin temple.

Brother Wei looked at the business card, then the brochure, alternatively. He wasn't much sure what could this outsider, who clearly lacked any of the qualities that made a true martial artist successful, possibly appreciate of the art of fighting. He suspected she was just some frivolous billionaire who had taken a passing interest in all things spiritual and was way out of her depth now, ready to drop everything and go on to the next fad in a couple of months.

Then again, those kind of people contributed a significant fraction to the overall income of temples like the one Brother Wei lived in. That, too, was the spirit of the times. He looked once again at the balance sheet of donations, tossed it in a drawer without much care and walked out, whistling a happy tune.

A different island, Southern Ocean

A few days later

With her kind of life, and her kind of career, Sherry had seen all sorts of things. Street smarts were not an optional in her line of work. And still, her current job might have been the weirdest she'd ever
"Sherry, sweetheart, are you making dinner?" called a voice from outside the house.

"Yes, of course!" replied Sherry, popping three precooked meals into the microwave and slamming the door shut.

"Great! I'll wait for your delicious cuisine!" said the voice.

Sherry was not a maid, she was not a governess, and she was definitely not a cook. She would not have accepted a job as any of those things either, in principle - but this wasn't really either of them. Sure, she did a bit of everything in this house she'd been living in for the last months, but none of that was the main reason why she was being paid.

In fact, she was not entirely sure, yet, of why she was being paid. She only knew the job was cushy, stable, and reasonably well remunerated, and that was enough to make it vastly superior to almost anything she'd done in the last five years of her life. Given the conditions, she was well ready to perform some of her more usual duties as well, but that had never been requested. The old man had a thing which meant he mostly liked to look, apparently. He was one of those. Some other women would have found him creepy, but for Sherry, he was straight up vanilla. At the beginning he seemed to think he'd been doing it without her realising, which peeved her a bit. Even on the job, there were lines. But then they'd cleared things out. Now Sherry got a hour of proper privacy in the morning to clean herself up, and everything else was fair game. She'd still pretend not to know a thing, of course - that was the spice of it, for types like this guy. All part of the job.

As said before, extremely cushy. Sherry did not know what had taken her, to just go up and follow the weird bald kid who had come running to hire her, but it had been the best choice of her professional life.

"Master, I'm back! I finally finished!"

"Well, let's go have lunch then! I'm sure Sherry has prepared us something delicious."

The door to the kitchen slammed open, and in walked her customer and his pupil. The old man, even with sunglasses on, couldn't disguise the fact that he was totally ogling her. To be fair, Sherry had purposefully put on a rather modded version of an apron for the occasion, and was barely wearing anything under that. Never let it be said that she didn't give her customers their money's worth.

The bald kid simply kept his eyes low, red in his face with either effort or embarrassment, and sat at the table, ready to wolf down anything that got put in his plate. When the microwave rang, Sherry pulled out the trays and dumped their contents on three plates. The kid had started digging in before she could even warn that it was scorching hot. He didn't seem to mind.

"So, how did it go today, Krillin?" she asked with a smile, sitting down to eat her own share.

"Pwetty well." answered the kid, mouth half full. "I'm gwetting weally stwong."  
"You should not let it go to your head, boy." admonished him his master. "The path of the martial arts is one that's always going upwards."

Krillin rolled his eyes. "Weww, duh. You'we stiww stwongew than me, mastew Muten." He swallowed the rest of the meal in a single gulp. Sherry was impressed and slightly scared. "But I'm the only pupil of the strongest there is. That makes me basically the second strongest by default!"

Muten chuckled, feigning modesty. "Strongest there is, well, who knows, who knows! But you're
wrong to be so conceited. There's always someone stronger out there."

"Unless you're the strongest of all." pointed out Krillin. "Then there isn't."

"You know, he is right." agreed Sherry.

The old man shook his head. "Sherry, dearie, you're a sweetheart but maybe this isn't your field of expertise. Well, here's the thing. If you feel so ready to take on the world, boy, why don't you do it for real?"

Krillin's eyes lightened up. "You mean...?"

"The Tenkaichi Tournament is up and coming." Muten pulled a newspaper out of a pocket. "And this year it seems like they're doing some big changes. They're sponsored by Capsule Corporation, which means they'll have a lot of rich prizes. No better stage to prove that you're really the strongest."

"CAN I?" the kid jumped up in excitement. "Oh, I'm going to show 'em all! I promise I won't disappoint you, master! I will come back with the first prize!"

"I won't be bothered if you do." the old master chuckled. "But if you don't, that means I'm right, and you'll listen to my wise advice a bit more."

"Oh, sure! No problem master! It'll be SO GREAT! Gonna train now bye!"

And in a whoosh of wind Krillin had disappeared outside, running across the island with the speed of a motorbike.

"Well, he's got enthusiasm, I'll give him that." commented Muten, leaning back and splaying the newspaper open.

"You really think he won't win? He is incredibly strong." said Sherry.

"He is, he sure is, but you know. It's a big world."

"And you?" the woman fluttered her eyelashes. "Are you strong? You never show it."

"Eh, a bit, quite a bit." Muten blushed so much his whole head looked like a beetroot. "Do you like strong men, Sherry?"

She didn't answer, cleared her voice, and stretched a hand. Muten looked puzzled, checked his watch, then dug a banknote out of his pocket and gave it to Sherry.

"Oh," she whispered, sliding the money in the front window of her apron, "I love them."

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*Pilaf's castle*

*The same day*

Chichi was flying. Or, to be precise, the massive, four-propeller drone under her was flying, under Shu's control. Chichi was just along for the ride.

It was the best thing ever.
"Yuu-huu!" she screamed, delighted. "Higher! Faster!"

"I can't push it too far indoors, Princess." said Shu. "It's risky."

"Boo. You're a bore. You're boring." protested Chichi, with a pout.

"What is happening here?" Pilaf walked in, followed by the Ox King, stooping under a door too small for him. "We need to discuss important matters."

"Just a bit of fun for the Princess, Your Majesty." the dog waved. "Pay us no mind."

The drone with Chichi on board swooped in from above, nearly ripping off Pilaf's hat from his head, then pulled up again.

"Isn't that a bit... dangerous?" he asked, a bit shaken.

"Nah, Chichi can care for herself!" the Ox King laughed. "Ain't a small fall like this that can hurt her, I tell ya! Let her have fun."

"If you say so." Pilaf reached the throne, signalling to Shu that he'd better keep Chichi far from it, or else. After all, it wasn't danger to the brat that he was worried about.

"Now, on to our business." he said, dramatically tossing his mantle aside to sit on the throne. Even with all the added height, his head still was a good measure lower than the Ox King's, who was sitting on the floor in front of him. "You said you needed to talk about something."

"Yeah." the giant man nodded. "Money stuff."

"Oh." Pilaf's face fell. "That.

"We've gotta do somethin'. Yer funds are running out. And I didn't bring much from the ol' castle, which was on fire and all, so all my treasure's still in there..."

"Shu promised he'd find a way to recover it. Shu, how is the recovery project going?"

"Oh, excellently, Your Majesty!" the dog was huffing as he ran across the room, trying to recover control of the drone, that was now being steered around like a surfboard by a laughing Chichi who stood on top of it. "I just need a bit more funds to buy the necessary materials."

"Ya see?" the Ox King shook his head. "Him too. Those flying thingies don't pay for themselves, I tell ya."

"You have to spend money to make money." said Pilaf.

"That's all nice and good, but you gotta have money first. Thing is, I have an idea."

The man put his hand in a pocket and drew out a flier. It read *Find out who's the Greatest Under The Heavens!*!, with a picture of a handsome man in a martial arts getup striking a cool pose.

"Ya see, the Tenkaichi Tournament's about to happen." explained the Ox King. "Biggest martial arts competition in the world. I lost once when I was a kid, but I was a wimp back then. Got much stronger since then. And this year the prizes are huge."

Pilaf nodded approvingly, reading through the flier. He seemed on board with the idea until his face contorted in a horrified expression as soon as he spotted a familiar logo in the corner of the flier. "SPONSORED BY CAPSULE CORPORATION?" he shrieked. "The company of... that girl?"
"Don't see it as a bad thing." said the other with a shrug. "Yer basically just taking her money."

"Oh, that's true." Pilaf chuckled. "We can rub it in her face if you manage to snatch the first prize. You know what, we're convinced. This sounds like a great idea. Shu!"

"Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Put together the best training equipment you can find! The Ox King will have to get himself into full fighting shape in one month. And we need a plane to ride to Papaya Island..."

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*Somewhere beyond space and time*

*The same day (for what it's worth)*

"Hiya, Baba! Long time no see."

"Greetings, Lord Enma. How do you do?"

"Not bad, not bad. Same old work. This finally the last time you'll pass by here? Should I get your file?"

"That'll be the day." the little, grizzled old witch, laughed dryly. "You will see me hang around for a while still. I came to meet with someone. If you'd be so kind to call them down for me."

"Just gimme a sec."

The immense office was, as usual, crowded with people. Not just the souls of the recently departed from all corners of the cosmos, but the demon clerks carrying around documents too. No matter how many times she got to see it - and she was pretty sure no other mortal had seen it as much as her - Baba the Sybil was always awed and impressed by it. More so, as age kept creeping on her (even if she always wore her years well, almost four hundred of them started taking its toll), the prospect of walking in there not of her own will felt increasingly daunting. Many thought that fear of death spanned by ignorance of it, but even in her knowledge, she just couldn't feel much more at ease with the idea.

Somewhere, up there, a button was pressed. A soul screamed for mercy in an incomprehensible tongue as it fell through the trapdoor, and even its screams eventually faded out. Only a slight stench of smoke and sulphur lingered in the air.

Baba sighed. She really ought to consider donating a bit more of her money to charity. Not too much, though.

"Busy day." complained King Enma, putting aside some papers. "A star went supernova in the South Galaxy. So, who is it that you want to meet?"

"Oh, you know, the old man. The guy I talked to the last time."

"Ah, him." the demon nodded and started browsing a folder. "Sure, it's no big deal. You already going to use him in your tournaments? Customers coming?"

"That's not happening." the witch frowned. "Those lazy good-for-nothing bums dumped me. Went to work for someone else who apparently paid better. Bah. So I don't have warriors to fight for me now, and I'm bored."
"Always told you you gotta pay your employees more." King Enma laughed and patted his records book. "It's all in here, you know? When your time comes..."

"Yeah, we'll see then." cut short the old woman.

"So what do you want the old guy for? You can't have him fight alone, can you?"

"Different reason. He had mentioned to me he wanted to meet a certain someone, while I need to find new ways of having fun since those idiots left me, and there's something that will work just fine for both of us. Plus, there's money to be made, which is never a bad thing."

"ALEPPE!" One of the clerks ran out of the crowd, dropping all his work, to bow deeply in front of King Enma and listen to his orders as he pointed to a picture in his records. "Go to Heaven, in the Blissful Valley of the Burning Phoenix, get me this guy. And tell him... what should he tell him, Baba?"

"That on Earth, the Tenkaichi Tournament is about to be held." said the witch. "And that this year, Son Goku will be in it."

---

Red Ribbon Headquarters

Still the same day

If you weren't part of his staff, to get an unscheduled meeting with Commander Red, you had to submit your request of an appointment days in advance. If the reason was deemed possibly worthy of his precious time, you would get a meeting with one of his attendants. They'd hear your piece and consider it. If it was actually assessed as important enough to warrant the Commander's attention, you'd get your ten minutes slot to talk to him at some unspecified point in the future. Before entering the office, for security, you also had to submit yourself to a full body check.

Either that, or you could be Dr. Gero, Chief of the Research Division of the Red Ribbon.

The old scientist blasted through the office's door and bolted to the Commander's desk, violently slamming something on it. The Commander was still recovering from the shock when three agents from his security staff came through the doors and pointed their guns at the intruder.

"At ease, everyone." said Staff Officer Black, who was standing at the Commander's side. He gestured to the guards that they could leave, then turned to Gero, frowning. "Doctor, there are protocols in place, and they are there for a reason. You can't just burst in here unannounced."

"Nonsense." grumbled the other. "You know it's me. And this is way too urgent."

"Let him be, Black." Red laughed. "We trust him. And after all, you know how it is, geniuses can get a bit eccentric."

The Staff Officer didn't say anything, but sent a last, disapproving glance at the scientist. "So what is so urgent," he asked, "that it warrants violating all rules and disrupt our Commander's schedule?"

"This is!" He lifted again the paper flier that he'd brought in and fanned it in Black's face. The officer winced and withdrew slightly. "Listen here - The competition to establish the strongest... wonderful prizes... a show the likes of which you've never seen..., and so on, and then, here! Sponsored by Capsule Corporation!"
Commander Red grabbed the flier and read through it casually. "The Tenkaichi Tournament. Seems fun." he said. "But what's urgent about it?"

"These people are doing the same research I am!" screamed Gero. "This Bulma Briefs, barely off her mother's tit and thinks she's some hot stuff. You've seen it in the West City incident already. Now this. They're just throwing money at the problem. You know what happens if they get the drop on me?"

Black frowned. "All our weapons become obsolete. All our tanks, artillery and tactics are worth nothing. We get pushed out of the game in one fell swoop. However, doctor, I thought your research focused more on cybernetics?"

"It is all one thing." Gero waved his hand dismissively. "You wouldn't get it. Metal, flesh, machines are still machines. Different roads lead to the same result. She's trying to make superhuman warriors. Same as me."

"Oh, come on." suddenly Commander Red sounded much more worried. "Surely you don't think some civilian could just beat us at our own game."

"There is a possibility, I suppose." said the Staff Officer, solemnly. "This had already been on my mind for a while. Capsule Corporation certainly has the resources. And while they've never worked on military technology, that is just a choice of theirs. They certainly could, if they wished to. Plus, this is simply unexplored territory for all of us."

"Exactly. So if you just increased my fundi-"

Dr. Gero's plea was cut short. "We can't compete with them on money." said Black. "But there are other ways. If we-"

"You know what," interrupted Red, "we should check this Tournament out."

The Staff Officer raised his eyebrows in slight surprise. "I was about to suggest it. Gathering intel is certainly-"

"Papaya Island is really nice this season!" the Commander grinned. "And this event looks like fun. I could use a vacation, for all my hard work!"

"Commander," Black frowned, "I believe we should take this very seriously. We should send someone from our intelligence division, and they should inconspicuously-"

"To hell with that! I've decided, we'll go ourselves." said the other. "It's all very easy. We just go in civvies, check out what's going on. It's probably all just a publicity stunt. But if it's not, well, we just need to get rid of this Bulma person, right?"

"This company has a direct connection to the King." explained Black. "That kind of action may have consequences."

"Then we'll just have to make it look like an accident when the time comes. Doctor, you want to tag along? As an expert consultant."

"Absolutely not, Commander." snapped back the old man. "My work is at a critical stage! I can't leave my lab for any reason."

"So, same as usual." Red chuckled. "Cheer up, Black! We're going to have ourselves some fun."
The officer sighed. "Do I have permission to at least organise an escort?"

"Yeah, sure, grab some men to come with us. They deserve some time off too! Oh, hear this: the Tournament takes place on the background of one of the most beautiful natural scenarios found in the tropical seas..."

---

_Ptero tribe village_

_STILL the same day_

Packing up wasn't a big job, since no one among the ptero tribe wore clothes, and Giran was no exception. Still, he was taking some time doing it. He owned few things, but would need to leave some behind anyway. He was weighing one of his old weapons, a stone-cut axe he'd used a lot back in his childhood years to cut trees and hunt, when the older pterodactyl walked in the hut.

"Hard choices?"

"Nah, dad." Giran shook his head and dropped the axe. "It's just stuff."

The old ptero walked to him and hugged him dearly. His tiny body almost disappeared among the massive arms of the son.

"I'm sorry." said the father. "Exile is a hard way to walk. Especially if not deserved."

The younger ptero let him go. "It was the only way for me to leave the village that wouldn't raise any suspicion." he muttered. "I'll see my job to the end."

"You must." said emphatically the other. "By any and all means. We can not let ourselves be dragged on the wrong side of this war again. It would be the end of our tribe. And... it is not right."

"Don't worry. I wouldn't want our little conspiracy to be in vain."

"Do you have any plans on where to go, yet?"

"I've had a dream." said Giran, while picking between two small leather bags that were meant to be tied around his waist. "An island, to the south. A gathering of warriors where I could find allies."

His father laughed. "Well, I'll be damned!" he said. "I thought you never believed in the spirits and their messages."

"I'm at the end of my wits here." grumbled the other. "Might as well give it a try."

"Then may the spirits guide you to faithful friends. That they may light the way in your darkest hour."

"I'd be more grateful if they could beat up my enemies for me. I can afford a torch." Giran extended an open hand towards his father. "Do you have it?"

"Of course." the old ptero dug into a bag he kept across his shoulder. Out of it he drew something, and passed it to Giran. With his immense hand, the son picked the object up between thumb and index finger alone.

"I've replaced it with a fake." explained the father. "No one will notice until the day comes, and then
it will be too late."

"Great. That's all I need."

"I'll be going then. I wouldn't want to arouse suspicion. Goodbye, son." the old ptero nodded one last time, looking at the younger one with pride and sadness. Then he scurried away.

Giran dropped the small object in the leather bag. It fit snugly. It was a small, perfectly smooth stone ball.

"I'll be going too." he said to himself.

---

A small Red Ribbon base

...look, it was a very eventful day, okay?

Each push made the pulleys and cables creak, made some more sweat drop, and made her stronger. This was Mai's only thought as she worked her arms, laying on a bench under a training machine. The left arm was screaming pain with every muscle fiber. The right one did not have much to say any more - but the shoulder where metal joined with flesh did the speaking for it. Using it in training normally wouldn't have made much sense, but it helped her keep things balanced, and it helped her get used to it. Shoulder and chest muscles too had to readjust to the new, artificial limb, and she needed to learn how to limit its power to match the organic one. Otherwise it'd end up bearing all the brunt of every effort, and that wouldn't be good for the rest of her body.

"For being Violin, you play some monotonous music." quipped someone, entering the gym. Mai dropped the machine instantly and got up in an attempt at a salute. The violently burning shoulder prevented her from doing more than raising clumsily her hand.

"At ease." said Piano, smiling. "Violin, there's rehabilitation, then there's training, and then there's torture. I would draw the line at the second if I were in you."

"I'm just trying to get stronger." said the woman. "Worthier."

"All the more reason not to destroy your body, then, hm? Unless you love your new arm so much, you'd want to lose and replace the other too..."

Mai didn't say anything at that. The thought, she had to admit, had crossed her mind.

"What is it that you wanted to talk about, Colonel?" she asked.

"We're alone. Just Piano is fine." The old pterodactyl showed her a photograph. It was taken in the wilderness, probably with a zoom lens. It showed another pterodactyl like him, but young and massive, travelling naked and with minimal luggage. Instead of being green, his scales were cobalt blue. "I wanted to show you this guy."

Mai grabbed the picture and looked at it closer. "What about him?"

"He comes from a certain tribe." explained her superior. "One of which I, myself, was born, back in the time. A tribe that used to be loyal to our Master and whose loyalties are now... uncertain."

"Are they enemies?" she asked.
"Neutral, on paper." said Piano. "But you know how it is. This guy left the tribe earlier today. Very low key affair. Apparently, he was exiled, which would make for a perfectly reasonable excuse for him to go away without arousing suspicion."

"But you were suspicious." pointed out Mai. "Or there would not have been a sentinel guarding the place."

"My dear Violin, I am always suspicious. It's healthy."

"So what does he know? Can he do us any harm?"

Piano sat down on a stool, thoughtful. "We made contact some time ago, asking them to renew their fealty. They - very politely - declined. They didn't seem to be all on board, but promised they would stay out of it altogether. Good enough for us back then, we couldn't spare forces to punish them and risk blowing our cover. But the degree of enthusiasm across the tribe seemed very variable."

"You mean some might want to join us?" asked Mai.

"Yes. While some might be ready to oppose us more actively, which might be the case here. Before we lost contact, he was going southwards. Your next assignment is to find him, figure out what he's up to, and if necessary, eliminate him. You'll receive all the equipment and capsules that you need. Be warned: he's a warrior, and not one to be taken lightly."

This time, Mai managed a proper salute. "Thank you for your trust, sir."

"Oh, and another thing. I suspect he may have an item with him - an inert Dragon Ball. It goes without saying that you should retrieve it, as it would constitute an immense advantage when one year passes after their last use and the chase begins anew."

"Sure." the woman looked genuinely amazed. "Sir, with all due respect, that is... how do you know something like that? No radar can catch the Balls when they're inert, or so I thought. They're just supposed to be like normal rocks."

"You thought right. I know the same way I knew, more than one year ago, that the time had come to plan for bringing back our Master. The same way he always communicates with us." said the old ptero, with a thin smile. "I saw it in a dream."

Chapter End Notes

I'm finally back! Sorry for the pause over Christmas, but while the holidays meant a lot of free time, they also meant a lot of other things to do. With this chapter we officially open the new arc, the Tenkaichi Tournament. It wouldn't be a good battle shounen story without a TOURNAMENT ARC. And as you may guess, this will also tie in a much larger story involving the Red Ribbon and the other forces that are moving behind the scenes...

One little curiosity: the episode about Bulma's ninth birthday was originally supposed to be included in the previous arc as part of a bigger subplot involving Yamcha doing some superhero stuff, but then got removed due to time concerns. I pushed it to this chapter because I loved it too much to abolish it altogether. Had it been used as planned, the chapter would have been titled 'I will make you a kamen'. And yes, the watch is a
reference to the costume Bulma makes for Great Saiyaman in DBZ. If anyone wondered why did she already seem to know very well how to make something like that...

This chapter's title, on the other hand, is a reference to "The 36th Chamber of Shaolin", a great classic of Hong Kong kung fu movies. If you love the trope of extreme martial arts training sequences such as the one Goku and Krillin have with Muten in the original Dragon Ball, this is that trope extended to a whole movie's length, and you have to check it out.
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the idea and characters of Dragon Ball are owned by Akira Toriyama. This is a simple non-profit fan parody.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 18 - Turtle Master? I hardly know her!

On an average day, the population of Papaya Island was a couple thousand people and two dozen monks. For more than one century now, once every five years, the Tenkaichi Tournament was held, and that population rose to something like four thousand, between fighters and spectators, for a couple of days. The island's main town, adjacent to the temple, got somewhat crowded, but it was liveable. The residents went along with it, as it was a pretty rare and short term inconvenience. The local tavern's owner would rub his hands, hire a few extra helpers, and make some money to put on the side.

On May 6, 750, the day before the 21st Tenkaichi Tournament, and first to be sponsored by Capsule Corporation, the island's population amounted to 9,562 people. Every single hostel, inn and hotel in the island was fully booked. The town's surrounding countryside had turned into a makeshift camp, with impromptu tents pitched up all over the place, chemical toilets, and cooking fires. Luckily for everyone staying in such precarious conditions, the weather was some of the finest the world could offer, with mild, dry nights when only the gentlest of breezes would blow from the south. The residents were at their wits' end. Many had just locked themselves into their houses, with water and food stocks, waiting for the madness to be over. The local tavern's owner had tripled his personnel and was already planning how to scale up his little business into a worldwide franchise. Streets were brimming with grumpy, overexcited martial artists and were ready to turn into free-for-all brawls at the first provocation, or random glance somehow interpreted as one. Unsurprisingly, the drunken fist seemed to be the most popular fighting style in such brawls - even among those who did not usually practice it.

Then the night ended, the sun rose, and among many sighs of relief and many splitting headaches the eliminatory rounds of the 21st Tenkaichi Tournament finally begun.

"Please, get on the platform, stand still, and when you hear the acoustic signal, hit the cushion in front of you with your best punch."

Ranfan was a bit taken aback by these instructions, but she followed them and stood in the centre of the machine, in front of the cushion, surrounded by cables and sensors whose purpose she didn't understand. She had already attended one tournament, five years ago, and that she could remember, it had been nothing like this. A quick glance at the side of this machine revealed a Capsule Corporation logo, which made things clear enough. She huffed, a bit annoyed - a machine wouldn't be vulnerable to her usual tactics. But then again, maybe the operator was.

"What does this machine do?" she asked, taking care to sound sufficiently clueless, and batting her
long eyelashes. She looked straight at the monk that was handling the machine's console. He raised his eyes and gulped. Ranfan was a young woman, with an athletic body that wasn't buff enough to hide her natural curves, and her battle outfit was the skimpiest of bikinis that public decency laws would allow.

"I'm not sure." stuttered the monk, blushing. "It measures your strength, I guess. I don't really get how all of it works, but you need to pass a certain score to enter the next phase."

"Oh?" Ranfan made a cute, worried pout. "But couldn't you give me a little help?"

"Well, I..."

"No," said another voice, in a final tone, "he can't."

The fighter clicked her tongue, annoyed. Here was the most fatal weak point for her tactics - another (probably straight) woman.

Bulma walked to the console. "It's simple, really." she explained. "This machine measures the spiritual energy that your body emits when fighting. If you have more than the threshold you need to survive anything resembling a serious fight, you pass."

"Spiritual energy? Survive?" asked Ranfan, horrified. "What the hell are you even talking about?"

Suddenly, the machine emitted a loud ring, and the woman reacted by hitting the cushion with a right punch, as instructed.

On the screens, a tiny bump barely registered amidst a baseline of noise.

"And that's a no." concluded Bulma, with a smile. "Please leave and let someone who can actually fight try."

Ranfan stepped down and did as told, all while loudly proclaiming her outrage at just how low the tournament had sunk now that corporate interests were involved in it.

"She made it to quarter finals last time." pointed out Brother Wei, who had observed the scene from the side. "We agreed that a first selection would be useful with the increased participation, but don't you think maybe these criteria are too strict? We're still not sure how these machines of yours work."

Bulma shook her head. "We're better off without these nobodies, trust me. Have you seen her? It looked like she planned to win most of her fights by showing off her pretty body and confusing male opponents."

Brother Wei thought back at the last edition of the tournament, and all of Ranfan's fights that he had seen. "You know, you may be right about that." he concluded.

"Yeah, well, that won't fly. Being sexy won't save her from getting her bones pulverised by a single real punch. Not to mention, these people are a disgrace. There was another returning participant whose main strategy apparently is stunning his opponents with his stench. Lack of personal hygiene isn't a martial art! How did you ever let these freaks enter the tournament?"

"The tradition is that there are no limits to how a battle can be won, as long as it's won, and it doesn't involve weapons." explained Wei. "But admittedly, that definition may have been stretched a bit by some people in the past. Don't worry, though, none of them ever managed to claim first place."

"That's something, I guess." said Bulma. "But they still would offer a pretty poor show."
They walked through the gym, along one of the main free corridors. Half the space was taken by machines like the one Ranfan had just been eliminated by. They were arranged in a grid, with room in between for people to walk to them, and numbered. As the participants, who were waiting outside, were called, they came in, received a number, and submitted themselves to the test. This efficient process was quickly milling through the vast number of people who registered, a lot of which were frauds or clueless newbies drawn by the hefty prizes and the prospect of a free holiday on Papaya Island. This was also the phase Bulma cared the most about. At the moment of registration, all participants had to sign a waiver in which they allowed for the acquisition, storage and use of their biometric data for research purposes. And every participant who stepped in a machine got their ki emissions measured, in a similar way as Bulma's original scanner did, albeit in lower resolution. A quick glance at the information on her tablet showed Bulma that the data was mounting up, and just as she hoped, it covered all ranges of possible strengths. Everyone who scored above a certain cut-off passed to the next stage. The exact value had been a rough estimate, but it turned out it was a pretty good one, as almost one quarter of all the participants cleared it. Of course, it was still low enough that anyone who only barely passed it would be utterly crushed by someone on Goku's level.

The other half of the gym was occupied by small fighting rings. Here the more traditional elimination rounds were held, with successive direct matches between participants. Bulma wasn't exactly pleased with this approach. Direct elimination meant the brackets were wildly unbalanced due to the unpredictable numbers of participants, and the random nature of match-ups could mean losing strong fighters along the way or letting weak ones get to the finals by sheer luck. But tradition was tradition, and Bulma didn't want to upset it too much by suggesting round-robin brackets (not to mention, those would take days, with this many people). The compromise had been that brackets were structured based on the scores in the previous phase, so that should at least mitigate the risk of losing potential champions this early on.

Which made it all the more surprising when Spike, of all people, joined them with an extremely disappointed look on his face. He still wore his usual devil getup, but for the occasion, he had a Capsule Corporation logo patch sewn to his chest.

"Spike?" asked Bulma, confused. "Have you been eliminated?"

"Sorry to disappoint you, miss Bulma." he grumbled, with a low stare. "I have encountered overwhelming force the likes of which I did not expect could exist."

"Wait, weren't you matched up with Goku, or someone else we know?"

The other shook his head. "None of the sort. It was an old man with blue hair, similar colour as yours. Someone I had never met, but he managed to throw me off the ring with ease."

That was new. Bulma didn't expect someone stronger than her own hired fighters to show up. Spike seemed pretty down, though, so she wondered if he hadn't just lost because of some mistake on his part.

"Well, you can't win them all." she said, finally, shrugging. "Don't let it get to you too much. You'll see, I'm sure at least Bandages will-"

"Spike, you're here too? Damn it!"

The massive mummy joined the group as well. He didn't seem in his best mood either; he was frowning and occasionally muttering various profanities.

"Don't tell me." said Bulma. "Old man with blue hair?"
"What? No, what are you talking about?" snapped back the man, puzzled. "It was an old man, sure. I think at least. But no blue hair. He wore a mask, like a white fox or something. Punched me out of the ring in one hit. I swear, if I can put my hands on him, next time, he'll be sorry."

"I do not remember either of these fighters." said Brother Wei after a moment of thinking. "Though for the masked one it's impossible to tell. Do you think they're impressive?"

"Beating Spike and Bandages? That's damn impressive." muttered Bulma, biting her thumb nervously. Spike tried to minimise the compliment, while Bandages was too busy plotting revenge to even hear her. "I just hope it's not the result of bad match-ups."

She checked the brackets, that on her tablet were updated live. New fighters kept being added as they trickled through the first phase, and Goku still had to get his turn there. But even so, she could tell that the way the brackets were organised made sense, and the scores were equilibrated. Better still, neither Spike nor Bandages had been the highest scores in their respective brackets. That honour went to the two mysterious fighters who beat them. Those victories had not been flukes.

Bulma felt torn. On one hand, this was a great opportunity. If such strong fighters could be convinced to work for her, she'd get even more subjects to study. On the other, however, she considered her father's remarks about the possibility of traditional martial artists resenting her research. Whoever these people were, they must be real masters.

But there wasn't much else to do until she got to see these people in action. If they really were that strong, they'd make the finals for sure.

"Jackie Chun," she said, reading the names returned by her tablet, "and Inari-san. Let's see what they can do."

______________________________

"I'm sorry, do you mind, please, thanks!"

Pushing through the crowd on the bleachers was a real pain. Two hours before the tournament's public phase started, they were already full - not just of people looking for their seats, but of vendors walking back and forth with their trays of hot food and cold drinks as well.

"Dim sun? A hot dog? Yakitori?" offered one of them, waving a meat skewer in the face of a short, red haired man. His arm was grabbed by the tight grip of a much taller man with dark skin.

"Thanks, but we're not buying anything." said Staff Officer Black, gravely. "Now let us go through."

Intimidated, the vendor nodded and scuttered away. Commander Red made a displeased face.

"We could have had something." he complained. "I'm getting hungry here."

"We can't have you eat unchecked food, commander. Besides, with this heat, salty food will only make you thirstier."

"Will you relax? We're here dressed as civilians! No one will be after us."

"I would hope as much." said Black, shifting his eyes to the side. "But this is basic safety protocol."

They were indeed in plainclothes. Specifically, Black was wearing a sharp, tight-fitted white suit with a Panama hat, while Red was wearing trunks and a hawaiian shirt. They had to go down a few rows before they found their seats. Black gave a quick look around at the nearby viewers,
memorising their faces, then allowed the commander to sit down.

"These seats are atrocious." grumbled Red. "We're so far away."

"It's safer that way. Considering we don't know the level of power that will be displayed by the fighters, the first rows are irresponsibly close." commented his aide. "Besides, here we're out of the way of any TV cameras."

"Hmph. You do think of everything, don't you?"

"It is part of my job."

"What about the security detail?"

"They are here." Black glanced inconspicuously at a few seats all around. In each seat, the occupant gave a small nod or some other sign to acknowledge him. "In plainclothes and positioned as planned. They're seating in pairs, eight men total."

In his pocket, a cellphone ringed. The staff officer answered and listened for a while, but the call was over without a need for him to say anything.

"Our man in the eliminatory rounds." he explained. "It's a pity that we couldn't see those for ourselves, but he's managed to go a few matches before getting kicked out."

"Oh, that's too bad." commented Red.

"Better this way, less attention drawn. The way he described the eliminations, this Bulma person is taking full advantage of the situation to push her research. I suspect the actual tournament will just be dressing on top for that."

"So here's to hope it'll be fun dressing!" the commander laughed. "Come on, ease up already. Drop the work attitude and let's enjoy the show."

Black cracked a smile, but his eyes remained vigilant, shuffling back and forth between faces in the crowd surrounding them.

"Yes," he said, dryly, "let's."

Having finished showing her the eliminations, Brother Wei led Bulma and the two fighters who had just dropped out into a smaller room adjacent to the large gym. Here were some seats, tables and a few bottles of water, as well as a small altar.

"Here we'll wait for the participants who passed to the quarter finals." explained the monk. "The area is allowed only to organisers, finalists, and their coaches."

"Should we leave?" asked Spike, but Wei made sign that it was ok. He and Bandages sat on the edge of the room and started chatting about their fights.

There were still sounds of fighting and the occasional shout from the adjacent gym, but no one walked through the door. There really were a lot of fighters, thought Bulma. Even with direct eliminations, it was taking hours to sift through them all.

"Miss Bulma, may I introduce you to Brother Max?"

She turned around. Next to Brother Wei, with his long traditional robe and his shaved head, was a
completely incongruous figure - a man wearing sunglasses and a snappy suit, with a bushy head of bleached hair and possibly an artificial tan.

"Ok," she said, "and where is he?"

The man laughed and extended his hand. "Miss Bulma, I am Brother Max. Nice to meet you."

"Brother Max is going to comment the Tournament." explained Wei. "I realise his appearance might look less in line with our usual subdued style, but he's extremely committed to looking the part."

"I can see that." muttered Bulma, shaking the hand of what definitely looked to her more like a gaudy TV host than a monk.

"So, do we have our first bold aspiring champions?" asked Max, cheerfully.

As to answer his question, the door opened, and someone stepped in. Bulma looked at the new arrival - the first surprise was that it wasn't one of theirs. The second, that he looked like a miniature version of one of the regular monks of this place.

"What, I'm first? Oh, man, master won't believe it when I tell him!" shouted the kid, grabbing one of the water bottles and guzzling down the content in one go.

"Your name and school, participant?" asked Brother Wei.

"I'm Krillin," said the kid, standing proudly, "of the Turtle School. I am the only pupil of Muten Roshi."

To that, everyone in the room except for Bulma looked awestruck.

"Wait, who?" she asked. "The name rings a bell. Is it someone I should know?"

Brother Wei at this looked downright scandalised. Krillin limited himself to scoffing and sneering with superiority.

"Miss, I believe you are lost." he said. "Otherwise I don't think you could be around this temple of the martial arts without being aware of who Muten Roshi is."

"Excuse me? I pay for most of this thing! I..." Bulma's angry rant got interrupted when a sudden jolt of recognition hit her. "Of course! The turtle pervert from back then! You mean that old fart is a martial arts master? Now that I think about it, Goku might have mentioned something..."

The kid's face became purple. "That old fart is the greatest living martial arts master! And only a pervert second to that!"

"So you don't even deny he's a pervert." said the girl, unfazed.

"The greatest living martial arts master!" repeated Krillin. "Miss, you are lucky that as a woman, I am not bound to defend his honour with you, or I-"

"That isn't a very nice way to talk to a lady, young man."

The second one to walk in the room was an old man with blue hair. From his appearance and Spike's reaction, Bulma immediately tagged him as Jackie Chun. He indeed proceeded to give his name as such to Brother Wei - but did not disclose his school.

"Mister, I don't know who you are." said Krillin to the newcomer. "But she was insulting Muten
"Well now, was she?" asked the old man, amused, eyeing the girl.

Bulma scoffed. "I called him a pervert. Which he is."

Chun nodded. "Fair's fair."

"But mister," intervened Krillin, "she didn't even know him besides that! The greatest."

"The greatest, the greatest, is he really now?" blurted out Jackie Chun, annoyed. "We'll see to that I guess. Too bad he couldn't be bothered showing himself at this Tournament to prove it. But I suppose," and his sharp eyes darted to the boy, "his pupil will do just fine to begin with."

"You? Fat chance!" Krillin laughed. "You're just some old nobody. I will beat you like I beat all those chumps in the eliminations."

Jackie Chun sighed in exasperation. But he didn't answer - instead he just muttered something and excused himself, scuttling to the bathroom.

One minute later, out he walked, but this time without his hair and with a pair of sunglasses.

"Master!" said Krillin, his eyes shining.

"Muten Roshi! That face did seem familiar to me." exclaimed Bulma. Then, with a grin, she turned to Krillin. "Looks like you've been insulting your master too."

The boy frowned. "What are you talking about? That was Jackie Chun. This is Muten Roshi."

"What? But haven't you seen just now? Jackie Chun," said Bulma, slowly, "is Muten Roshi."

"That is absurd!" Krillin scoffed. "Jackie Chun has hair. Muten Roshi is bald."

"He's wearing a-ooof!" Bulma was suddenly pulled by Muten, who put a finger to his lips. Around her, she realised, everyone else seemed to have taken the hint, despite having come to her same realisation. She bent next to him and whispered while being close enough that only he would hear her.

"What is this pantomime about?" she asked.

"Just an educational experience for the kid. He needs to learn some humility." explained Muten. "Would you mind not ruining my cover?"

Bulma looked at Krillin for a moment. "I guess I won't. He looks like he could use being taken down a peg." she finally concluded, after some thought. "He's not very bright to not realise it himself, though."

"He's just very trusting of me." said the old master. "Let's try not to change that."

Bulma smirked. "Ok. So I hope you won't mind if I do this. To not make this chat look suspicious, you understand."

And said this, Bulma hit Muten with the mightiest slap she could muster.

"Pervert!" she shouted, taking care that everyone would hear. "How dare you ask something like that of me!"
The old man chuckled apologetically and scurried to Krillin, who in turn just rolled his eyes. The master didn't look like he'd been hurt much, or at all. Bulma couldn't say the same - her hand felt as if she had just slammed it on a block of concrete. After all, this was someone stronger than Spike.

Muten was in the middle of giving Krillin a stern talking-to about showing some more respect to his elders when the third finalist walked through. This time, it was someone Bulma knew all too well.

"Goku!" she exclaimed. "You took your time."

"I didn't want to risk hurting anyone, so I just picked most competitors and walked to drop them out of the borders." explained the kid. Bulma laughed at the image and decided she really ought to check the footage of those fights. Goku was wearing a flaming new gi that had been made for the occasion - bright blue, with an orange sash, and the Capsule Corporation logo on his heart and his back.

"Name and school?" asked Brother Wei.

"Goku," he answered, "and self-taught."

To that, Krillin sneered, and Muten immediately switched to another talking-to about not underestimating any opponents. Not that Goku was making this any easier. He looked mostly spaced out, and would for some reason keep scratching his butt. Bulma actually called him out on that, but he simply replied candidly that he'd been itching all day for whatever reason. When he finished with his own pupil, leaving him behind a bit disgruntled, Muten walked to Goku.

"Nice to see you again, boy." he greeted him. "Did you find any use for the Kintoun in the end?"

"Oh, sure." said the boy. "It helped save Bulma's life once, and West City another. Thank you for giving it to me!"

Muten raised his eyebrows. Obviously, he decided, this kid would go places.

The next participant to pass the eliminations had to hunch down just to be able to get through the door.

"Ox King!" said Bulma and Muten in unison. The Ox King's face brightened and he ran to the old man.

"Master!" he cried out, clutching him in what looked more like a deadly bear hug than a sign of affection. "What are ya doin' here?"

"Just training the next generation." said the master, unperturbed. "What about you? I've heard things..."

The two started chatting away like old friends. There were shoulder pats and laughter and then suddenly Muten went back in teacher mode, as the much larger man seemed to shrink in shame and kept his head low, nodding along with his words. Bulma could only look in amazement as she realised how much respect this old man seemed to command from all who knew him.

"Look at who we have here." said a shrill voice behind her. "How nice to see you again."

She turned around. She had figured out he might have come along too, but she was hoping not. She wasn't sure her gratitude for his help during her temporary episode of death could make it easy to withstand his company for long. What with him being an absolute moron and all.

"Pilaf." she said. "How surprising. I didn't peg you down as a fighter."
"Very funny." the impish creature walked forward with a smug smile. "We are here in the role of coach to the Ox King, of course. We thought you might appreciate contributing to our little political campaign."

Bulma forced a smile. It didn't quite come out right. "Oh, sure. There's prizes for all finalists, though how much depends on how well your champion will do."

The other shrugged and chuckled. "Oh, we do not worry about that. Our peer is surely more than enough to-"

"Hey, Pilaf!" barged in the Ox King, still excited. "Sorry to tell ya this, but I don't think I can win this thing."

Bulma barely suppressed a laugh, while Pilaf's eyes seemed to pop out of their orbit.

"What do you mean?" he hissed. "You said-"

"Well, yeah, but I didn't know master was here." explained the other. "And he's got a pupil. Taught me all I know, this guy. I don't think I can beat him."

Muten didn't even bother pointing out that, supposedly, he was not participating.

"Shouldn't the pupil surpass the master?" pointed out Pilaf, annoyed.

"A good pupil, yeah." said the Ox King, shrugging. "But that was Gohan. Me, I was so and so."

Muten came closer and patted him on his back, chuckling. "Don't put yourself down too much. I'm just that strong." He then turned his eyes at Pilaf. "Wait, do I know you? You remind me of someone."

"Never seen you, old man." mumbled the imp, still frowning.

"Of course!" Muten slapped his forehead. "The old dynasty of kings. The Rice. I knew I'd seen that complexion before. I remember when King Basmati was crowned, when I was young. Good times."

"When you were young?" Pilaf sounded rather incredulous. Bulma raised her eyebrows as well. "Old man, that was more than three hundred years ago, before the Demon King War."

"Yeah, when I was young, as I said." said the master, candidly.

"So, if you don't mind me asking," intervened Bulma, tentatively, "how old are you?"

"Oh, I turn..." Muten stopped for a quick calculation, "three hundred and twenty this year."

"What?" asked Bulma, confused. "How?"

"I drank the Elixir of Immortality." said the old man, with a shrug.

One might have believed the island had just been hit by an earthquake, because Bulma's incoherent scream seemed to rattle the building itself.

"HOW IS THAT A THING?" she finally managed to say, after going through a bit of unintelligible rambling. "And more importantly, can I have it?"

"Nope, sorry." Muten shook his head. "I told you I drank it."
Bulma’s face fell. She caught her head in her hands. "And you didn’t think you should find a way to make more of it instead of chugging it all down the moment you got it?” she moaned.

"I don't think I could have. That was three hundred years ago, we didn't have all of these fancy hi-tech things you youngsters like these days." explained the old master. "Plus, it didn't preserve itself well. I had to climb the Peak of Eternity to find it, and when I brought down what was left over for my older sister, it started spoiling as soon as it got too warm. So my sister still kept aging quite a bit more than me, and it had other... side effects."

"Side effects?" asked Bulma, but before she could get any answer, another voice, raspy and rather annoyed, chimed in.

"That was all because you're a dumbass who couldn't be bothered to keep it in ice as I told you to."

In the doorway now stood the most incredible granny that Bulma had ever seen. She was short, shorter than Pilaf; barely as tall as a toddler. But her head was quite a bit higher than that, because she stood on a crystal ball almost as big as herself, and the crystal ball stood on, well, nothing. It just sort of floated around.

Bulma sighed. By now, she was just sort of getting jaded to the impossible and was beginning to wish that life around her just went back to good old making sense. Especially considering the old woman most likely would not sell her the magic floating crystal ball for further study, so she would just have to live with the questions.

Muten raised his eyebrows. "Nice to see you too, sister."

"Stopped you right there before you could say more than you're supposed to." spat the old woman, casually floating in front of him, and rising a bit so she could stare him down. "You shouldn't reveal my business secrets."

"And I imagine business is what leads you here?" asked the other, unfazed.

"What else? I'm here in the role of coach, and I plan to win the first prize. Inari-san, come in!"

Another man, with a similar body build and apparently age as Muten, walked in. He wore a fox like white mask. This, obviously, was the guy who had beaten Bandages, thought Bulma. But besides that, she also noticed that a lot seemed to be going on in the room. It was like there was suddenly a surge in tension. Bandages and Spike looked at the old woman; the old woman purposefully avoided eye contact with them, with affectations of spite, while she kept exchanging cutting remarks with her brother; occasionally, she seemed to even look at Bulma herself with a marked antipathy; and as for Inari-san, his gaze seemed to move between Muten, the Ox King, and Goku, on whom he seemed to focus especially, though it was hard to say for sure with his mask. Bulma felt like there were a lot of unsaid connections there that she was unaware of and that made her feel left out. She approached Spike and sat next to him.

"Who's the woman?" she asked, whispering.

"Baba, the world famous Sybil," explained the man. "Our previous employer."

Oh, that explained a lot. Obviously not a relationship that had ended on the best of terms.

"Sybil?"

"She is a renowned fortune teller." continued Spike. "She can find anything or anyone and even get some idea of the future with that crystal sphere, but her tariffs are very high. However, she also
enjoys combat sports, and so she occasionally gives away her services for free to those who can beat her teams of hired fighters and give her a good show."

"That was you." said Bulma.

"Used to be." pitched in Bandages. "Honestly, it was damn boring, and the pay was a joke. Stingy old woman. Now she just makes do with the spirits of the dead, apparently."

The girl blinked. "Is she a medium too?"

"Not what I meant. Look at that dude who beat me up. I should have noticed when I faced him on the ring. Over his head."

Bulma did as told, and at first she didn't notice anything - but then, focusing her eyes a bit, and looking hard enough, she wondered how could she have missed it. Above Inari-san's head was a circlet of light, a golden, bright halo, hovering in mid-air.

"What the fuck?" she whispered, in awe.

"He's been brought back to this world from the afterlife," explained Spike. "Baba exists somewhere in between the world of the living and that of the dead. Now and then she goes and fetches some warrior of the past to fight for her."

Bulma wondered if this was one of the 'side effects' of the spoiled elixir Muten had mentioned. If instead of making her immortal, it only had let her die in part, so she had one foot into the afterlife at all times. Whatever that meant, it was all frankly pretty freaky.

"Do you know who he is?" she asked.

Bandages shook his head. "Not a chance. She said she had an ace up her sleeve even back when we were working for her, someone who was really strong, but she'd get him down only for a special occasion. The gods only allow 'em to stay for one day."

"So, to sum this up," said Bulma, pinching her nose, "immortality is granted by drinking an elixir that has now ran out. Magic allowing clairvoyance and fortune telling is performed by looking into a crystal sphere. And you can just go to the afterlife, waltz in, and summon the dead back on Earth as long as it's for a limited time. Are there any other unlikely miracles I should be made aware of?"

"I did it!" announced Yamcha, waltzing in from the gym, wearing a Capsule Corporation gi identical to Goku's.

"You just got lucky with your bracket." grumbled Bandages.

He flashed back a smile. "Yeah, well, luck's a skill too."

"It really isn't." said Bulma. Then, "That I know of," she added.

No point feeling so sure about anything, at this point.

As Brother Wei stepped in to take Yamcha's data, that made six fighters out of eight that would battle in the quarter finals. She noticed another monk bringing in a big box and a white board, and the names of the fighters who had arrived were written on lots and tossed in. Clearly there would be a drawing for the match-ups.

Muten had also disappeared. After one minute, he popped out of the bathroom again in his Jackie
Chun persona. Ox King stared and squinted at him, and Bulma wondered if he'd pulled that ruse with his previous pupils too. Inari-san also chuckled softly under his mask. What was up with him? He looked like he definitely had a connection going there too. Or perhaps he was simply amused by the old man's disguise, and most of all, by Krillin's total obliviousness at it. The kid might need some humility, true, but his naiveté wasn't going to do him any favours either.

The seventh fighter was, finally, someone neither Bulma nor anyone else in the room had any relation to. A large, blue pterodactyl who introduced himself as Giran, and after that merely went to sulk in a corner, lost in his own thoughts or meditating. Checking his performance data revealed that he didn't appear to be too strong compared to some of the other fighters in the room; he just had ended up in a relatively easy bracket. For all his massive size, Bulma suspected, he would easily go down as soon as he'd have to face the really big shots.

That only left one. Bulma checked what was going on with the eight bracket and saw it was at the last fight now. The number of wounds and broken bones reported, she noticed, was worryingly high. This could mean anything from a particular vicious fighter to battles that were too close to resolve easily. However, seeing the names of the two finalists gave her a shiver.

"Nah," she said, chuckling, "that can't be."

The finals ended, and one name blinked out. A small note was added mentioning the opponent was to be given medical assistance. Bulma frowned at seeing that name going forward. Surely, it must be a coincidence. Someone who just happened to be called the same.

"What's going on?" asked Pilaf, coming close, trying to perch up on his heels to see the tablet.

"The last finalist." said Bulma. "It can't be her, but her name is-"

"Mai."

They both turned around. In front of Brother Wei, declaring her name, stood Pilaf's old companion turned traitor. Her black hair had been cut short, she wore baggy pants, a tank top and a jacket over it, and her right hand was covered by a leather glove, but she was still impossible to miss, down to her signature red eyeshadow.

"And your school?" continued the monk.

"Military training. I would rather not say more." she replied.

"You!" shouted Pilaf, suddenly, running to the woman. "You traitorous! Ungrateful! Murderous!"

"I'm sorry, do I know you?" said Mai, flatly, turning around on her heels. Brother Wei appeared confused, but eventually turned to Pilaf.

"Sir, I must ask you not to bother..."

"Let's bother her instead!" intervened Bulma. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Mai smiled. The bitch. "I don't know what you're going on about. I don't believe we have met."

Bulma and Pilaf exploded in a flurry of questions, accusations and downright insults, while the Ox King and Goku came closer to observe while still being wary to intervene. The rest too came close, curious about the confusion, except Giran, who just didn't seem to care. Finally, it was Brother Wei who broke the fight.
"Enough! Whatever has gone on between you outside of here, it stays outside." he said, firmly. "The Temple is a sacred ground for martial arts and all that we demand is that the contestants keep to the rules while inside. All rivalries and personal enmities are to be left outside."

"She won't keep the rules!" hissed Bulma. "She's a fucking snake. If she's here, it has to be because she's up to no good."

"Miss Bulma, do you have anything to substantiate these accusations?" asked Wei.

"She killed me!" replied the girl, passionately.

Weird, puzzled looks were exchanged around her. "Killed you?" asked Muten, raising his eyebrows.

Bulma lowered her eyes. "I got better." she mumbled.

"Even if she was an actual murderer," explained Wei, "she would still get protection while inside the temple. Our rules are absolute. While we may not personally approve of some life choices, we seek to be welcoming to every one, and foster the personal growth that comes with unity of body and mind. We believe it may even be of some help."

"That is very wise." said Mai, smiling and bowing slightly. Bulma was sure she had winked in her direction maliciously. She turned around and walked away, just to restrain herself from punching her.

Brother Wei stepped to the altar at the back of the room, having the other monks carry the box with the drawing lots and the whiteboard next to him.

"It is now customary," he started, "for the participants to take an oath. Please come in front of this altar, bow slightly, and answer: do you promise that you will uphold the rules of the tournament; that you will not do anything to infringe them, and hurt any participants outside of the ring, nor any of the organizers; and that if one or more of you were to break these rules, the others will help in stopping them and bringing them to justice?"

"Has any of this ever been necessary?," asked Yamcha, worried.

"Not really," the monk reassured him, "it's just a tradition."

The eight participants swore as requested. Bulma kept an eye out for Mai - she almost expected her to cross her fingers behind her back or such. No such luck; in fact, she seemed to be more enthusiastic than others, maybe not to raise any suspicions. Next thing, names were drawn to fill in the slots on the whiteboard, and the match-ups were established.

**Match 1:** Krillin vs. Yamcha

**Match 2:** Goku vs. Ox King

**Match 3:** Inari-san vs. Giran

**Match 4:** Jackie Chun vs. Mai

Bulma frowned. Yamcha and Goku being in the first two matches was bad - at best, they would still have to fight each other in the semifinals, which meant she couldn't get the all-Capsule Corporation final she dreamed of, which would have made wonders for publicity. Why did Bandages and Spike have to go and get beaten? On the other hand, though, a similar situation was found in the other bracket with Jackie Chun and Inari-san. It was only good that at least one of them had to go. Mai was up against Jackie Chun first thing, and that too was good. Bulma couldn't imagine her winning a
direct fight, without weapons, in close quarters against the old master. If anything she'd come here to do depended on her going forward in the Tournament, she was out of luck.

Not to mention that, however wrong that was, she couldn't help but feel a tinge of devious pleasure of knowing that Mai, the sole woman participant, was going in physical combat against the most perverted old man on Earth.

The Tournament grounds had looked approximately the same for most of the event's history. When Bulma stormed in, money in one hand and high technology in the other, to both fund and revolutionize the whole thing, she knew better than trying to mess with such an iconic aspect of it. After all, it was important that the event keep up the same front as ever - in this case, both metaphorically and literally. The stage thus was pretty much unchanged, a square of marble tiles slightly elevated on top of a plaza covered in grass. Behind it, on one side, was a massive wall separating it from the rest of the temple complex, a white building with straw roofs and three large horned stone masks representing demons or warrior gods on both sides and on top.

However, some changes had been made where common sense demanded them. To begin with, the bleachers had been pulled farther away from the ring, and transparent protective barriers had been put up before the front rows. Bulma wasn't sure of the efficacy of such protections in case of direct attacks - Goku could easily punch through a panel of resin a few centimetres thick - but at least they should shield the spectators from rubble or shockwaves. It was understood that attending personally the tournament came at one's own risk; to make this more explicit and avoid any legal consequences, she had included a waiver to sign when buying tickets, but this didn't mean she wouldn't bother trying to minimize danger anyway. In addition to all that, cameras and microphones were put up all around the ring, and while referees would still stay near it, the announcer would not. There was a new position for him, in a small cabin with transparent walls perched on top of a newly built pylon. Here the announcer could talk from multiple speakers as well as look at the action on screens that received the feed from all cameras. The cameras all had the highest framerate that technology allowed, and actions could if necessary be replayed and slowed down for the commenter's benefit. Bulma had a slight feeling this would end up being necessary.

And now, the cabin was where she was sitting, next to Brother Max, ready for the opening announcement of the 21st Tenkaichi Tournament.

Max tapped the microphone and cleared his voice. "Hello everyone, and welcome to the twenty-first edition of the Tenkaichi Tournament, the competition among the strongest martial artists of the world to establish who is the absolute best! We have here with us the young and genial Bulma Briefs, heiress to the Capsule Corporation empire, that has so generously sponsored this year's edition. Do you want to say a few words, miss Bulma?"

The girl blinked, caught by surprised, but immediately got on board and grabbed the microphone. "Thanks, Max. All I want to say is that you guys have been really great at setting up all of this and... uhm... I'm happy to have gotten this chance to work with you! As you all know, Capsule Corporation is now at the forefront of research in human potential, and we care a great deal about the kind of extreme performance the best fighters can get out of their bodies. This is the perfect event for us, and I'm glad to say that two combatants who have been trained with our new, advanced facilities have made it to the quarter finals! Look forward to their matches."

Hearing those words, Staff Officer Black frowned and pulled out a pair of binoculars to get a better look at the stage. Next to him, Commander Red was wolfing down on a bag of pop-corn.

"Thank you, miss Bulma! Let's not waste any time, then. More than five hundred fighters travelled to Papaya Island to try their mettle at the Tournament this year, an unprecedented number! But don't
worry, because only the strongest are deemed worthy of standing on this stage, in front of you, and duking it out for the title of Greatest Under the Heavens! Out of more than five hundred people, only eight remain - and they will now fight tooth and nail until one prevails!"

In the room in which the fighters waited for their turn nervousness seemed to be the prevailing mood. Most participants sat isolated from the rest, concentrated, or unleashed some tension with simple warm-up exercises and katas. Goku, Jackie Chun and Inari-san were exceptions to this trend, as they all seemed rather imperturbable.

In a corner, Mai felt a vibration within her robotic arm. It was a simple method of secret communication - all she needed to do was interpret the code made of trains of little, short pulses. The message repeated itself twice to avoid any misunderstandings. Commander Red is among the public. Avoid detection.

"Without further ado, then, let the twenty-first Tenkaichi Tournament begin!"

Chapter End Notes

Sorry if this took longer than anticipated. I've hit a bit of a slump recently and tried distracting myself with writing different stuff. Also, real life will probably be messy in the upcoming months. I will still try to keep up the pace - I can assure you the plot exists clearly already, it's just a matter of me feeling inspired to actually write it down. Anyway, thanks for your support and reviews!
Chapter 19 - Four fights and a no-show

After the initial announcement had been met by cheers and applause, silence fell for a while on the stadium. The lethargy induced in the public by long hours waiting sitting in the hot weather had been replaced by bristling anticipation. Finally, the speaker went back on, playing a rock tune that hyped the audience up even more for the upcoming bout of (hopefully controlled) violence.

"For the first match of the quarter finals!," shouted Brother Max, at full lungs, even though he was speaking in a microphone. "Our first contender is someone whose name you should know all too well already! If he can't knock it out of the park, who will? This young sports prodigy must have realised beating people up is more fun than batting, because from the diamond he's just stepped straight onto the ring! But that is no surprise - to all our friends from West City, this is no less than a hero, who gained fame first playing in the Dinos, then protecting the streets! Sponsored by Capsule Corporation, trained by the best technology cutting-edge science can offer, give a big cheer for YAMCHA!"

There was no need to say it. As soon as the warrior stepped out of the gate, he was showered in applause, chants, and the high-pitched, loud squeals of the girls from the Yamcha Fan Club, who had occupied a whole corner of the bleachers for themselves and had now unravelled a giant banner for him.

Bulma raised an eyebrow and sighed at how fleeting the mood of the crowds could be. Then again, it was all free publicity for her, so she didn't feel like complaining too much.

After a round of greeting and waving, Yamcha took his place in the centre of the fighting stage and started stretching arms, legs and fingers. Bulma felt pretty sure that was less about actually warming up and more about having an excuse to show off his muscles. Each time he flexed something seemed to draw one more squeal from a certain corner.

Brother Max waited for the perfect moment at which the public was slightly calming down, and immediately took the mic to whip it up back into a frenzy. "Coming to challenge him! He's bald, he's bold, and he'll knock you out cold! At only thirteen, he's not even the youngest participant to make it to the quarter finals, but don't let his age fool you! This kid has done it all - training at a Shaolin temple and then with none other than the legendary Muten Roshi, the Turtle Master! His pedigree is top grade, but will it be enough to step up to the challenge? It's tradition versus science in this first clash of schools! Enter KRILLIN!"

The kid walked in with his usual bluster, but seemed to immediately lose some of that when not only his entrance wasn't nearly as well-received as Yamcha's, but he actually got some people whistling
"Now, now," intervened Brother Max, as Krillin started answering by making obscene gestures at the public and the situation seemed to degenerate, "this is sports! This is martial arts! Don't bring that sort of negativity to this stage - let the fists talk! Remember: you win by either pushing the opponent out of the ring, knocking them out for ten seconds, or forcing them to admit defeat! No low blows, no using weapons, and no killing! May the best one win! MATCH ONE, START!"

Krillin had only one instant to realise what was happening and go back to his fighting stance before Yamcha was upon him. Not unlike some of the other chums he'd fought during the elimination rounds, this one seemed to being holding back and expecting an easy win because he was a child. His punch was weak and slow, and Krillin easily parried it.

"Your loss." said the kid smugly, and thrust his own fist straight towards Yamcha's solar plexus. The punch connected, and the opponent was pushed back by a couple of metres.

Krillin raised an eyebrow. He had meant that to push him out of the ring.

"Oh, I see you can hit." commented Yamcha, getting back in a fighting stance. "Didn't think I could go all out already."

Krillin sneered. "Against a pupil of Muten Roshi? You have some nerve. I'm surprised you can still talk that easily, though."

"Eh, that was nothing. I'm not as good as Goku, but I can control ki too, you know."

"Ki?" the kid was puzzled. "I know the word but..."

There wasn't time to finish. Yamcha zoomed forward again - this time so fast Krillin almost didn't see his movement. He barely managed to parry on his right, but then it turned out it was all a feint, because an even faster kick came to his left side. Krillin felt like he had been hit by a truck, and went down hard on the stone pavement of the ring. Really, not the best material to prevent people from hurting each other badly, he realised.

"You don't seem used to this, huh?"

Krillin kicked off the ground, throwing himself to the side barely one instant before Yamcha's axe kick hit the spot where he previously was, and cracked the tiles under his heel. Krillin's sense of confidence that he had gained through multiple elimination rounds in which he faced opponents that he vastly outstripped in terms of physical power melted. This was someone in his own league - with power comparable to the superhuman strength he had gained through Muten Roshi's gruelling training.

"Wait-" he shouted, but Yamcha was upon him, again. Krillin panicked. He was strong, but was he also proportionally resilient enough? He had never had a chance to test it - never fought someone as strong as himself. And the punch that was aimed straight at his ribcage would provide him the answer, which he felt wouldn't necessarily be pleasant.

Not able to dodge or parry, he simply rolled with it, and pushed himself backwards to soften the impact. The punch still hurt a lot. Krillin recovered and tried to question his memory of his training, look for ideas he could apply here.

And he came up completely blank.

Yamcha flexed his legs back. Only one metre behind Krillin was the edge of the ring, and here the
opponent was preparing for his final push.

"Ready? Here I come. Wolf's Fang-"

The thing was, Muten Roshi's training had had little to do with martial arts at all, realised Krillin in a panic. Not the best moment to realise that, either. He'd been at first too taken with the headiness of having been accepted as a pupil by the greatest master ever, and then too tired to really focus on it, though he was sort of aware. When the preliminaries had been so ridiculously easy he had stopped worrying, but now, faced with an opponent that was both strong and in possession of decent technique, he couldn't avoid confronting that simple fact.

In the last six months he hadn't learned the first thing about how to fight.

"-FIST!" screamed Yamcha, as he jumped forward again, his palms ready to strike. Calling one's attacks was a great way to induce panic in an inexperienced opponent that now had to expect something really dangerous coming their way, and it worked - Krillin disorderly tossed himself to the side at the last second. Yamcha's hands, clutched like hooks, struck all around him, in a complex pattern that seemed to flow perfectly and yet being utterly unpredictable to him, as each strike created a blind spot that prevented him to see what the other hand was doing. He avoided some of that, but a few hits found their target. Still, it wasn't enough to push him past the edge, and before Yamcha could finish it with a mighty double palm strike, Krillin crouched and rolled between his legs, coming out of the other side. He tried a kick to Yamcha's back, but the other had foreseen that because he kicked back in response, and Krillin had to stop himself at the last moment and jump to avoid it.

"Good job taking that on." said Yamcha, smiling. "Here comes another, though."

Krillin thought desperately about what resources he had at his disposal. There was his Shaolin temple training, of course. Nothing especially original, but the basics were all there, and his new strength should make them proportionally more powerful. He calmed down a little. However, what had made Muten Roshi such a great master - was it just brute strength? He expected him to possess also refined technique, and he'd been counting on learning that to become really invincible. Yet here he was; he had spent months simply carrying out brute strength tasks, such as delivering milk, ploughing fields with his bare hands, or dodging bees, sharks and other dangerous creatures, but never once had he practiced katas or learned special techniques.

Or had he?

Krillin smirked as finally he was enlightened. Of course. A real master's teachings wouldn't be transparent! They would be clouded in secrecy, and in layers of opaque meaning, and it would be up to the clever pupil to figure out their true value.

The boy planted his feet on the ground, assuming an aggressive pose. "You're done for!" he proclaimed boldly, puffing his chest. Yamcha raised his eyebrows, shrugged, and prepared for another attack.

"Wolf's Fang Fist!"

This time, Krillin was prepared. He closed his eyes, letting his other senses do the rest, and visualised the strikes arriving at him not like fists and slaps - but like bees. The bees that he had been dodging for hours at an end, tied to a tree, day after day.

His body flowed naturally, unimpeded, perfectly timing each movement. Yamcha's onslaught became more furious as each fist kept missing the target. But the pattern now was obvious to Krillin,
and dodging it a trivial matter. He'd been avoiding much worse, after all.

Defeated, Yamcha withdrew, to avoid the risk of giving an opening to a counterattack.

"What the hell was that?" he asked, short of breath.

"That," explained Krillin, proudly, "was the Turtle Style: Beekeeper's Defence."

"The what?"

The crowd murmured. "An exceptional display of skill from Krillin, who until now had been pressed on!" screamed the announcer. "Now, will he be able to follow that with an equal prowess in attacking?"

Krillin pulled back his fists. He knew just what to do now. He gauged Yamcha's distance from the edge of the ring - their previous exchange had swapped their positions and left him with his back to the wall. All he needed to do was take him by surprise and push him over.

There was a section in his daily milk delivery path - a road surrounded by lines of trees that Muten had him zig-zag all the way through. It had been the slowest bit of the whole route for him until he had gotten strong and fast enough to use a certain trick.

"Turtle Style: Milkman Walk!" he announced.

And then he disappeared. No, not disappeared, realised Yamcha - he was just side stepping. Left to right, right to left, so fast it was impossible to see him or spot his position exactly, but at each step advancing also forward. Yamcha got on guard, but defending precisely against an attack that could come from an arc of almost 180 degrees in front of him would be hard. He just put his arms in front of him as a shield, waiting for a blow and ready to respond in kind after taking it.

Ploughing fields with one's bare hands was no joke. The ground was hard and heavy, and all muscles down to legs and back were involved. Still, as Krillin's body had been forged by that and other equally gruelling exercises, it had all gotten easier. At the end, it felt like the clay-like dirt of his island was soft and light as whipped cream. Which meant that he was ready for ploughing something more.

"Turtle Style: Farmer's Fist!" screamed Krillin, suddenly coming to a halt next to Yamcha, and plunging his fingers straight into the pavement. The stone itself gave way and crumbled. With a last scream, the kid threw his hands into the air, and a whole chunk of stone and dirt below - not to mention a dumbfounded Yamcha, who was standing on top of them - were tossed upwards. Before the fighter could recover from the surprise and do something to control his fall, he had crashed out of boundaries.

The stadium was speechless.

"Can he do that?" asked Bulma to Max, under her breath.

"He can."

"But usually it takes more than one match for them to realise. Which is good, because repairing the ring isn't cheap."

Bulma groaned. As if losing her first fighter already wasn't enough trouble.

"Well, what an amazing turn of events!" exclaimed Brother Max, turning the mic back on. "Krillin defeats Yamcha with an incredible secret technique! With this, he's the first to advance to the semifinals!"
A mix of cheers and stunned surprise, with the occasional jeer, accompanied Krillin's self-satisfied walk out of the ring, while Yamcha got back on his feet.

Jackie Chun had been looking bemused for all the last part of the fight. He came closer while the fighters left the ring.

"Say, boy," he asked, side-eyeing Krillin as he passed next to him, "I've never seen anyone fighting that way. What was that about?"

The kid grinned. "Those," he said, proudly, "are the secret techniques I was taught by Muten Roshi in person!"

And so he left, leaving the old man more confused than he was before.

"Hey, Yamcha. Good fight."

"Heh. Not good enough, it seems."

"You shouldn't let it bother you too much. Bulma told me before she left that kid actually scored 20% higher than you at the scanner. So you actually did pretty well to hold your own for the first half."

"Thanks, Goku. That really cheers me up."

"And now for our second fight! He, too, studied under Muten Roshi, years ago. But since then he's been busy running a kingdom of fire and death! Infamous and legendary for the brutal justice he administered in what absolutely counts as his own personal jurisdiction, this massive warrior seems now to have stepped back into the ring to turn his violent disposition to a higher purpose! Large and in charge, I present you: THE OX KING!"

The Ox King walked onto the stage to the tune of a death metal song screaming about slaughtering one's enemies. The public did not look impressed, and remained mostly in a slightly shocked silence. His fame wasn't as great in urban areas, but enough people had heard stories about him, and the man looked just plain dangerous. For the occasion he had taken off his helmet and armour, banned as protections by the rules, and Bulma got to see his eyes for the first time, gleaming under two bushy eyebrows. He still wore his signature red cape, which billowed behind him as he stepped up.

"I am sure we are all wondering, what leads such a man to change his ways?" asked Max. The public didn't sound like they were wondering at all. "Mister... err... your Majesty, would you tell us?"

There was a moment of deadly silence as the audio was switched to the directional microphones designed to hear the contestants' words but the Ox King didn't realise it. Then, when he finally noticed everyone's eyes on him, he spoke.

"I'm not changin' my ways really." he blurted out. "Just makin' some money, is all. I'm supporting my friend Pilaf's claim to the throne, as the real King of the World."

There was another moment or two of stunned silence.

"And I'm sure that was just some pre-fight trash-talk and not any hint of high treason or sedition!" hurriedly concluded Brother Max, closing the microphone. "Now, for the next participant! He is the youngest one around, at an age of twelve! And just like Yamcha in the previous fight, he's here to show the results of Capsule Corporation's training! He's got brawns and brains and is afraid to use..."
neither! Give it up for SON GOKU!

Goku stepped up to the ring. He had begrudgingly left his stick behind due to the tournament's rules on weapons. Bulma had wondered if he'd be embarrassed by the crowd watching him, but he seemed just fine. A few months of city life had gotten him used to seeing so many people all together. He stood there, flexing left and right, warming up, and again, conspicuously scratching his butt, which made Bulma feel embarrassed for him.

The two combatants exchanged bows.

"MATCH TWO, START!"

The Ox King ran forward, slow but inexorable. He couldn't bring his axe, but he swung around his hands as if they were a pair of them, ready to hit the neck of his opponent with their chop. Goku kept his distance, and let the opponent come closer, push him to the end of the ring.

"Last time we fought we got interrupted!" said the King. "This one yer going down!"

He launched a downward attack that would have slammed Goku against the pavement if the kid didn't instantly propel himself with a kick and slide in between the giant's legs, emerging from the other side. Before he could even exhaust his momentum, he jumped up with his palms and lightly kicked the opponent in the back, then recovered his stance. The Ox King found himself unbalanced and rotate wildly his arms around to recover, coming dangerously close to falling outside of the ring himself.

"Ya almost got me," he commented, panting, "but that's the end of it."

"That's true. I'll need to try something different." agreed Goku, calmly.

The man dashed again towards him, but this time when Goku stepped back he didn't risk coming too close to the edge. Instead, he grinned, planted his hand into the hole left by Krillin's attack from before, and grabbed a whole chunk of rock that he tossed at Goku.

"Oh, dear." muttered Bulma, seeing so much expensive marble used as a projectile weapon.

The rock's trajectory was studied in such a way that if Goku was to avoid it, he would have been pushed towards the edge, which would have left him vulnerable to a direct attack.

Hence, he did not avoid it.

The rock crashed with a deafening noise, and for a moment, the kid was enveloped in a cloud of dust and detritus. There were small screams and gasps from the bleachers, where people almost certainly expected to see the smoke settle and reveal a corpse.

Instead, what appeared was Goku, standing, unharmed, with a hand protruded in front of himself, palm open. Almost no one understood what could have possibly happened. Bulma smiled. Among the other athletes looking from the sidelines, Jackie Chun whistled in appreciation.

Goku pulled back his arms, then tossed them forward as if launching something. Except, there was nothing. Well, not nothing at all perhaps - one could see a faint glimmer, little more than dust glistening in the sun or a swarm of fireflies, leaving his hands and flying straight towards his opponent.

"What ya doin'?” asked the Ox King, annoyed. "This is not-"
He could not complete the sentence, as a hail of *something* hit him square in the chest, pushing him back. It wasn't painful or anything - almost tickled, to him. But it was enough to push him off balance.

"Hey!" he roared. "What game ya playin'?"

Goku didn't answer. He ran in circle around him, gesturing more with his hands, weaving strange patterns, and spraying more of those luminous dust mites of his. Tiny globules of energy, really, barely large enough to be seen with one's naked eye. They zapped around, almost imperceptible, but whenever they hit, they gave the big man a decent push - enough to mess his footwork, make him trip, push him towards the edge.

"What the Hell are these things!" shouted the Ox King. He tried to swat them with his hands, to no effect. There were too many, too small, and too fast. A couple more hit him head on on his forehead, almost knocking him on his back.

With a raging scream, the Ox King planted his feet into the ground. *Literally.* He pushed so hard, they jammed themselves into the pavement. From the commentator's cabin, a loud, pained whining could be distinctly heard.

The tiny ki blasts now didn't do much. The Ox King's position was unassailable. After a few futile attempts, Goku withdrew them, and sent them to explode innocuously against a wall.

"Ya ran out of tricks?" roared the giant. "Let's see ya fight fair and square, man to man!"

"I would rather avoid that." said Goku. "That is why I was using those attacks."

"What, ya scared? What ya even doin' here at the tournament if ya can't take a little hurt?"

The kid shook his head. "I wouldn't want to cause unnecessary harm. It *is* just a sports event."

"What are ya saying? This is *the* Tournament! The big one! Ya won't fight on a bigger stage in yer entire life! Holding back isn't something ya do here! It's... disrespectful, is what it is!"

Goku blinked. He seemed genuinely surprised, as if he had not considered that angle at all.

"I apologise." he said. "This is my first time attending. I will try to live up to the spirit of the competition."

"That's what I wanted to hear! Now-"

The Ox King's words turned into a whimper, and the whole stadium gasped and winced simultaneously, as Goku landed a single, violent kick straight to his opponent's belly, so fast and hard his leg visibly sunk into it. The giant man hadn't even recovered when a second hit, a punch square to his jaw, sent his head spinning. Goku landed back on the ring's floor. His opponent's body wobbled for a moment, then fragorously fell to the ground. The referee immediately ran up to check that he was still breathing and start counting.

Next to a completely overwhelmed Brother Max, Bulma chuckled. Yamcha may have been a disappointment, but Goku was delivering. She'd seen him fight against the Ox King when they were chasing the Dragon Balls and well, she knew he had gotten stronger, but did not think he would be *this* strong.

Ten seconds passed, without the Ox King as much as twitching. "And that's a sudden victory for Goku!" shouted Max, finally shaking himself from his surprise. "Next up..."
"Ouch, that must hurt!"

"Indeed."

"Well, this kid's good! Wish we could recruit him, eh, Black?"

"He is part of the Capsule Corporation team, Commander. That makes him far closer to an enemy."

"True. Wouldn't want to have to fight him head on though, right? Right?"

"..."

"Black? Why aren't you laughing? It's a joke, you know! You have to learn to relax a bit. Want some popcorn?"

"What were those tiny shiny things? That's not fair!"

"Hmm. It looks like a new application of spiritual power. He must have come up with it himself. That is beyond impressive for a kid his age."

"What? I'm a kid his age! And I trained with Master Muten, and he never told me anything about using spiritual power to make shiny bullets or such, old man."

"Maybe your master thinks certain skills should be learned only when one has the wisdom to know how to best make use of them."

"What do you know, old man? My master isn't some old loser who would hold back onto his pupils with such a lame excuse!"

"Now listen here! Your master will decide things such as this for your own good and you would do better to trust him on matters on which he has literal centuries of experience over you!"

"Why do you even get so worked up? It's not like you are my master."

"...no, of course I'm not. What a foolish thought."

"...the lizard of the East! The blue menace! The pterrible pterodactyl! Let's hear it for GIRAN!"

Giran stepped up on the ring for second, raising a brow at the frankly rather lame introduction. After all, it was not like he'd come to this event looking for fame or glory. In fact, he felt slightly uneasy having come so far as to stand on the actual ring, in front of so many strangers. Going through the eliminations had been remarkably easy, but from the previous fights, it looked like he had simply been landed in an easy bracket. He would have rather had the chance to meet whatever ally he was supposed to while in the relative privacy of the gym, but none of those he fought felt even remotely close to being potentially of much help for him. Here, at least, the level felt like it was significantly higher. In fact, some of the feats seen in the previous fights had left Giran rather baffled. He had hear such things in the stories of the elders, but never really thought about them as being truly real.

What about his current opponent, though? The ptero looked at him, and felt he was an enigma. Not unsurprising, since he concealed his face behind a mask. Both his casual pose and clothing seemed unassuming; he had not spoken, only given a friendly gesture of greeting to him. He didn't seem especially muscular or well built, and in fact looked quite old, but Giran knew better than underestimating him altogether, especially since he had made it here too. He would have to test him
personally, here on the ring.

"MATCH THREE, START!"

Giran assumed an aggressive stance, but knew better than blindly charging into whatever this guy held in store for him. He started circling around on the ring, keeping his distance, trying to study the opponent or find an opening in his guard. The most troubling thing was, his guard was full of openings, or rather, he had no guard at all. The masked man, Inari-san, only stood immobile, his arms behind his back, and if the smile on his fox mask wasn’t his real expression, it seemed quite appropriate. To stand in such a way in front of a warrior, on a martial arts ring, was the height of arrogance. Yet this must be no amateur, or he would not have progressed this far. The alternative was rather terrifying.

Calling back to his training, the endless repetitive tasks whose purpose was as much to teach him to quite down his mind as it was to strengthen his body, Giran expunged all these thoughts and focused on the matter at hand. *Fight as best as you can. Make him sweat for every second he spends on the ring.* If the old man wouldn't humour him with a proper defence, then nothing could stop him from attacking him from the most vulnerable angle possible.

The ptero shouted, darting with a single leap towards the old man's undefended back. He waited until he got the instantaneous confirmation of a reaction of any kind from the opponent, and then unleashed his *real* strategy - kicked off the ground, flipped, aiding himself with his small wings, and landed *in front* of the opponent, ready to elbow him in the back of his head as he turned to face him.

Inari-san didn't turn. The slight gesture that had prompted Giran to jump had been only a feint. Perfectly aware of every movement, perfectly in control, as if he was seeing everything in slow motion, the old man extended his arm and grabbed his opponent's arm, twisting it behind his back and immobilising his every movement in a single, smooth attack.

The pressure he was exerting was insane, even more so because *it didn't even hurt much.* Giran realised this was someone so strong, he could afford to *toy* with him.

"Where in Hell have you come from?" asked the ptero, panting.

"Nowhere." said the other, jovially. "I'm from the other place."

And just like that, it was over. A single push tossed Giran straight over the edge of the ring and on the lawn. The crowd seemed split between excitement for the incredible display of skill and disappointment for such a short, one-sided match. The commentator was shouting his usual incoherent nonsense and sounded like he was about to have an heart attack.

Giran picked himself up and dusted his body off. He climbed back on the ring, extending his hand to Inari-san. Rather amused, the man took it and shook him. The ptero accompanied the gesture with a small bow, taking the chance to lean in close to the man's ear.

"You're the one I came here looking for. I need your help." he whispered.

Was the other surprised? Impossible to tell, with that mask.

"Well, now," said Inari-san, after a moment of pause. "I'm really afraid I can't. I need to go back to my place right after this."

That couldn't be it. Not unless the spirits had sent him here as a cruel prank. "Please." pleaded Giran. "It's important. You're a martial artist - you must have heard the name of Piccolo."
Yes, he must have. Because the old man took pause again at that.

"I really can't help." he said finally, shaking his head. "But keep an eye on the other competitors."

Giran perked his ears. "What about them?"

"The man who fights next, Jackie Chun." explained Inari-san. "And the kid with the scruffy hair. You can trust them with your life. Just talk to them once all of this is over."

"Wait, do you know-"

The old man didn't let Giran finish. He swiftly turned around and left him in the middle of the ring, walking back to the backstage.

Might as well follow him, decided the ptero. The Tournament was over for him, and between the sweat and the dirt, he could really use a shower.

In the commentator booth, next to Max, Bulma was sulking. It wasn't that she didn't think the Tournament was turning out well (it was, and anyway the part that mattered most was already done, her data from the preliminaries safely stored away), nor it was that she was disappointed for Yamcha dropping out so early (well, she was, a bit, but she wasn't thinking about that right now). No, the reason for her foul mood was mostly the awareness that in the next match she would have to see Mai, the woman who had once murdered her, walk right on the ring, and she still hadn't figured out what could she possibly want with the tournament, or how to stop her and expose her as the criminal that she was.

In fact, she wasn't entirely sure what had she wanted the first time they had tangled, either - besides, obviously, the Dragon Balls. She didn't have much of a lead beyond knowing that she was or had been part of the Red Ribbon apparently, and that wasn't exactly the kind of organisation you knock at the door of asking for a list of their employees. In a world with one massive central government and a few small independent principalities, such as the Ox King's mountain, the existence of a vast mercenary army that acted mostly as muscle for hire to settle disputes between those states was tolerated by the law - barely. But they weren't the most upright guys, and there were nasty rumours about the activities they'd get involved with in order to rake in some money when their usual kind of job was scarce. So, Bulma's conclusions had been that Mai could be either still working for the Ribbon, or be on her own, and that she could want the Dragon Balls for personal reasons, or to aid some nefarious criminal plan of theirs. That wasn't much to go on except for the dead certainty that it was bad. And now Mai had showed up to her Tournament, and Bulma had no way to prove that she was up to no good. All she could do was keep an eye on her and hope that there would be enough time to intervene if she were to try something funny.

Speaking of funny, her match with Muten Roshi promised very much to be that.

"And now!" shouted Brother Max, commanding the stadium's attention once more. "For the last match of the day! Our first fighter may seem a bit of an enigma, but not to the expert of history! For years ago he actually has already taken part in the Tournament - and won! That's right, we now have a former champion walking on the ring, known to all as JACKIE CHUN!"

The announcement of a former champion seemed to fire up the crowd, and at the peak of excitement Muten walked on the ring, with that ridiculous blue wig of his, greeting left and right the cheering spectators and basking in their praise. He winked, he smiled broadly despite the fact you could count his remaining teeth on one hand, he sent slobbering kisses back towards the stands. Bulma felt a sudden impulse to crawl somewhere and die just out of second hand embarrassment.
The announcer cleared his voice, calming down the cheers. "Next up is a real enigma!" he started. "We don't know her past, she has no track record as a martial artist, yet she managed to arrive here! She's a-"

Murderous bitch, thought Bulma, decrying how uncreative Max's announcement was compared to what she would have had to say.

"-former soldier who must have had a really great drill sergeant! Salute MAI!"

Brother Max ended his introduction with his usual excited tone, and it was still met with a sizeable round of cheer and applause, despite the fact that there really was no one rooting specifically for this completely unknown woman. Still, however low the public's expectations, what they got was even more disappointing.

Because no one appeared at all.

"Sorry, I'll say it again... it's now the time for MAI to come on the ring!" repeated Max, emphatically.

Nothing. A puzzled murmur ran through the crowd. Jackie Chun, or Muten, started getting restless himself. He was stroking his beard up and down, looking at the empty door of the backstage with a frown.

Max looked at Bulma, confused, as if she was supposed to know why bloody Mai wasn't coming out to fight. The girl shook her head, irritated. She already had a bad feeling about this.

"Will miss Mai please step out? This is the last chance." explained Max, slowly. "If she does not present herself, Jackie Chun will be declared the winner by default."

The door remained empty, at first. Then someone stepped out, but it was clearly too short and too bald to be the right person.

"We can't find her." said Krillin, his voice captured by the microphones and amplified throughout the stadium. "She's not here."

The hubbub got louder. Jackie Chun sighed, but he seemed more thoughtful than disappointed.

"Well, I think that settles it." mumbled the announcer, a bit dejected. "For the first time since I can remember, we have a no show in the final phase of the tournament. Jackie Chun wins the match!"

While the crowd reacted with protests and Max took to calm them down, Bulma cursed under her breath and left the room, without saying anything. She needed to get to the backstage, get Goku and Yamcha, anyone whom she could trust. Whatever was going on, Mai not showing up for her match had to be part of it.

She only hoped she would not be too late.

Giran looked at the shower stall with a stare that was between puzzled and annoyed. Of course the bloody things would be human sized. He wasn't one to share certain extreme feelings he heard from the elders of his tribe, usually, but this was one occasion in which the thought that there might be too many apes scouring the Earth crossed his mind. In the end, he decided that after all the fault for this was on them, and simply ripped off one of the walls separating two adjacent stalls, merging them into a single shower space.

Before stepping in, he touched the belt and pouch at his waist, the only thing he was wearing. He
was about to untie the buckle, but thought better of it at the end. A little water would not ruin the thing. It was more important to keep the contents of his bag close to him at all times.

He turned the tap and let the water flow, at a temperature that any soft skinned mammal would have found scalding but for him felt just like a pleasant warmth. He let it run on him for a while, thinking about his next move. He would have access to the backstage for the rest of the matches, even if he had been eliminated. So perhaps he could get the chance to talk to one of the people Inari-san had mentioned at some point. He still wasn't sure why he should trust the guy, but there was something about him - as if he radiated an impression of trust. He just didn't feel like he could be lying to him or playing dirty. There were way too many ineffable, ungrounded intuitions going into this mission for Giran's taste, though. He could take his time to at least observe those people until the end of the Tournament before making a choice.

From outside there seemed to come a ruckus. Giran guessed this must have to do with the next match, but the crowd didn't sound excited or thirsty for violence. More like disappointed. He perked his ears and that's how he also heard something else, through all the water roaring around him. Someone had silently stepped into the stand next to his.

"Who are-" he started asking, but there was no need for an answer. A hand pierced right through the thin barrier separating the two stalls and went straight for his belt. With a roar, Giran jumped back, subtracting his pouch to the enemy's grasp while clawing at the arm. No sooner he connected that he realised something was amiss. The arm didn't budge, and instead a sharp jolt of pain propagated from his claws to his fingers, and up his arm. His jump sent him crashing against the barrier behind him, which gave way. In front of him, the enemy swung their arm casually aside, tossing the small panel it had pierced away. The ptero realised why he had hurt himself - the arm that had attacked him was not made of flesh, so he had miscalculated the strength required to slice it. In front of him was a woman, wearing just baggy military pants and a tank top. Her right arm was a cybernetic prosthetic, the likes of which Giran had never seen.

"You're the woman from the next match." he growled. "Not here to participate in the Tournament, I take it?"

"I didn't much care for the match-ups." she replied, with a smile. "I really wanted to have a go at you, you know."

The ptero steadied himself, taking a combat stance. "You're one of them. The tools."

"The Instruments." Mai corrected him.

"I know what I said."

Not much was left of the stalls, at this point, and water kept pouring out of the shower. Giran was not a coward, but he still checked whether there were any obvious exists he could use to avoid the fight altogether. In this situation, playing it safe took priority, and being outed would play to his enemy's disadvantage. Still, he had no way out - the window would have been barely enough for a human, and she stood between him and the only door. Breaking down a wall was not beyond him, but not something he could do fast enough and would leave him open. That left him no choice.

"Good thing we're not on the ring." he said. "So I can kill you."

"Good thing we're not." she agreed. "So I can use this."

She had kept her left hand behind her back, but now she showed it, and it was holding a gun. Giran tossed him aside to make himself a hard target, but he already realised where this was going. Mai
fired one shot which landed on his left. The problem wasn't the gun - it was the threat of it. She could control the battlefield from afar with it, pushing him into the direction she wanted. Until he was caught with the wall on one side, and on the other...

"Gotcha!" she shouted. Her right arm plunged forward towards his throat. He deflected it with his own, but couldn't manage to get in a good kick. His massive size and the small size of the fighting quarters were playing against him. This bitch had chosen her battlefield carefully, he had to give it to her.

Nevertheless.

"You're puny!" roared Giran, tossing himself forward with his whole body. A flimsy human woman was no match for almost half a ton of pterodactyl muscle and fat. His race had lost the ability to fly a few million years ago, but that didn't mean his wings had no purpose either. He used them to slightly direct and propel his lunge better. Mai was overwhelmed and pushed away. She tried to aim her gun at the opponent in front of her, but with all that mass pressing against her she couldn't move her left arm freely.

Her right arm clutched Giran's flank in a pincher between upper and forearm. He thought he could shrug it off, just long enough to suffocate the attacker into unconsciousness, but he had to reconsider that. Just how strong is that thing?, he thought, cursing as he had to let her go and regain his distance. It felt like his organs would be squeezed out of his mouth.

She turned at him with the gun, fired again and again, five times in total. He dodged, all while counting the bullets. Each was one step closer to Mai's defeat; without the weapon, her left flank would be completely vulnerable. But now she had driven him under the shower again, and the water and steam were messing with his senses. He couldn't see her, or hear her, or perceive her movement, clearly enough, and that was all she needed to connect a punch. Surprisingly, the metal arm didn't hurt as much as he instinctively feared it would - but that made sense, after all, for a punch a lot of the strength had to come from her own fleshy body. Still, it hurt plenty. He kicked wildly to push her away, but that was a mistake. She managed to block, grabbing his ankle with her hand. Her robotic hand.

"Guess you won't need this." she said, with that vicious amusement of hers.

She clenched her fingers, there was a crack, and Giran gritted his teeth to stand the pain. His options had just reduced to almost none at all. She had pulverised his ankle beyond all usability for this fight, and perhaps the rest of his life. Now all she needed to do was exploit his lack of mobility to attack him and he'd be done for. As for him, he had almost no way out.

Except perhaps for the most unexpected one.

Unable to go anywhere, he just lunged forward. He knew very well where her arm was. His pain told him. He grabbed it with his own left arm. Mai didn't expect this kind of attack, though to be fair it was for a very good reason. After all, why would anyone throw himself so openly against her gun?

The answer being, because she had left him no other option, of course.

She shot once, twice. Her last two bullets. Giran took them with a grunt. His belly was thick with fat. He could take it and live, for a while at least. No way this ruckus wouldn't attract someone any moment now. Time was his enemy's most scarce resource, and he was going to make sure she ran out of it.

His right claw clasped her throat, and he managed to roll on the floor on top of her. She was pinched,
and not even her mechanical arm's great strength could get her out of this lock.

This was the time when he could have interrogated her. But really, there was nothing he needed to ask her. He only needed one less enemy.

"This is where you die, lackey!" roared Giran, his pain making his voice hoarser. "The world to the strong, is what you guys say, right? Guess you weren't strong enough!"

Mai grasped for air, her eyes flashing with anger and pain. Good, thought the ptero. She could take that feeling of frustration of not being able to do anything to stop her death right down to Hell. His fingers tightened.

There was a click. Before Giran could react, Mai's handgun had exploded in a puff of smoke, going back to capsule form. The shockwave wasn't powerful, but combined with the surprise it made the ptero back down, and his right hand let the woman's throat go. That was all she needed. With a jerk, she freed herself - by detaching her mechanical arm.

Of course she can take it off, thought Giran, getting hazy for the pain and blood loss. Stupid, stupid.

"Here's where the shots came from!" shouted the voice of a woman outside. "Goku, hurry!"

Mai jolted up to her feet. Before he lost consciousness, Giran lifted his eyes to see her holding the item he was supposed to protect, the smooth stone sphere that would become a Dragon Ball, in her only remaining hand. She even flashed him a triumphant smirk before running to climb the wall and jump through the tiny window.

Then, as people rushed in the room, and there was noise and talking and someone calling for a medic, the ptero warrior dozed off into darkness. Out of the two holes in his gut, blood trickled down, mixing with the hot water and swirling down the shower drain.

Chapter End Notes

So the fights begin! None of these were especially tense, at least the 'official' ones - but expect that to change with the semifinals! But of course, there's more than just fair game going on in this tournament. Thanks as usual for the reviews!

Also, in this chapter's title it might be a bit harder to catch, so I'll say outright that in this case the obligatory reference is to 'Four weddings and a funeral'.
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the idea and characters of Dragon Ball are owned by Akira Toriyama. This is a simple non-profit fan parody.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 20 - Semifinal fantasy

"Quick, stop the bleeding!"

"Someone help me carry him! Bring a stretcher!"

"No need, I can lift him."

"Ok, but be careful. Don't make his body move too much, the bullets must stay in place!"

It happened all incredibly fast. Bulma had immediately went to warn one of the monks when she heard gunshots, and then ran with Goku to the shower room. Here they had only caught a glimpse of someone jumping out of the window, and had found Giran laying down on the floor, bleeding out of two holes in his gut. His claws were clutching the wrist of a contraption that Bulma realised was a prosthetic arm - the most advanced she'd ever seen.

If there were any doubt on the identity of the attacker, on the arm, scrubbed away but still recognizable, was a symbol made of two red triangles, with the letters RR on top. The logo of the Red Ribbon.

In a few minutes, Giran had been transported to the infirmary, and everyone else was waiting in the small antechamber that separated it from the rest of the complex. The tension was palpable. No one knew the ptero personally before that day, but having been nearly witnesses of a murder, and aware that the culprit was still at large, would still put most people on edge. The monks, in particular, were positively outraged. To everyone else, these events were unsettling and highly unusual - to them, they were outright sacrilegious. Their temple was not supposed to be a place of violence. Or at least, not the kind without rules and a referee.

The door to the infirmary opened. "He should be out of danger." said the doctor who came out, taking off his surgical mask. "We removed the bullets and stopped the bleeding. Fortunately his physiology means no organs or arteries were severed. He'll recover."

There was a general sigh of relief, and as the tension relaxed, people started chatting up each other excitedly about the events.

"Will he be able to fight again?" asked Bulma.

The doctor thought about it for a moment. "Hard to say, but I think so. The bullet wounds are not the problem there, but his ankle was messed up pretty badly. Ptero bones are lighter than human ones, and that makes them both more fragile and harder to repair."
The girl nodded gravely. Behind her, an argument had exploded.

"You can't do that!" shouted Krillin, obviously very passionate about the topic. "I'm here to win this thing, you know!"

"We have to." replied Brother Wei, inflexible. "Nothing like this had happened on the tournament grounds since the beginning of this event. It is unthinkable to continue the Tournament."

"Wait, what?" shouted Bulma, suddenly alert to the argument.

"They want to end it now! Lady, tell them that they can't!" pleaded the kid.

The monk shook his head. "We most certainly can."

"But that doesn't mean you should." intervened Bulma. Wei looked at her scandalised, while Krillin was suddenly beaming with gratitude.

"Miss Bulma, do not be led to believe that your financial contributions give you the right to-"

"That is not what I'm saying," she cut him short. "Think about it. Right now the culprit - Mai, obviously - is out there. We don't know where exactly, but probably still inside the perimeter of the temple. Out of that window you don't go anywhere special, and there's a tall, smooth wall all around the complex. She's probably wounded, exhausted, and without an arm. I don't expect she'll be climbing walls right away, she's not that strong."

Wei frowned. "We should still send people to patrol."

"Agreed. Even if she's trying to lay low for now, it's probably wise, she will try to escape at some point. But if you stop the Tournament now, well, then people are going to start to leave. And then all she would need to do to disappear is mix with the crowd and walk out of the main doors."

"She has a point." said Jackie Chun, caressing his beard.

The monk was about to mount an objection, but desisted. "So what do you suggest we do?" he concluded, defeated.

"Let's continue as normal, pretend this small delay was just due to some trivial accident - say, that Mai has felt sick and that's why she's missed her match. And while the four remaining competitors fight it out, we'll look for that criminal and seize her."

Brother Wei seemed torn. "Fine," he snapped, finally. "Let's do it this way. I'll go tell Max to announce the next match. Goku, Krillin, come with me. It's your turn next."

"I don't mind too much," said the Ox King, who was still massaging his chin where Goku's punch had left a visible bruise, "because that wench has it comin'. But why are ya so sure that we're gonna help?"

Bulma smiled innocently. "Because, remember at the beginning of the tournament? For circumstances like these, you swore you would."

"We apologize for the delay - there was a minor accident and one of the contestants required medical assistance. But don't worry, he's going to be okay! Now let's move on to the next event - the two youngest participants in the Tournament, finally face to face! For the first semifinal it's KRILLIN vs.
Brother Max did his job properly, whipping the stadium back into a frenzy after the long wait had caused a lot of murmuring and discontent. The problem was, Mai couldn't be fooled - she knew they'd have figured out very well what had happened to Giran. Bulma was worried that she might decide that if they had not evacuated the stadium, she could as well force their hand by sparking another incident that would send everyone into panic. But doing that would have exposed her as well, and from there to capturing her it would have been a chinch. For good measure, though, Yamcha was visibly sitting on top of the commenter's tower, with a nice bird's eye view of the entire event. If something happened he could intervene in fractions of a second, and hopefully the deterrent alone would be enough to prevent the possibility. Everyone else of course was wondering what kind of eccentricity caused one of the eliminated participants to just hang out on the floor of a building, but there would be a spectacle to hold their attention soon enough.

Krillin and Goku walked up to each other and bowed in greeting.

"Sorry, but I'm going to beat you." said Krillin, with a smug grin. "I promised my master I would win this tournament."

Goku gave him a rather blank stare and shrugged. "Well, you can try." he replied.

For some reason, this seemed to irk his opponent far more than he intended to.

"Ready? FIGHT!"

Krillin immediately went to the offensive, running towards Goku while jumping left and right like he had done with Yamcha. Goku didn't wait for his attack to land, but instead instantly sprinted to the side, swinging his hand around as if tossing sand. One moment later, a hail of tiny ki blasts invested Krillin, throwing off his balance.

"Those things again!" he shouted, swiftly changing directions.

Goku kept the blasts coming, but now warned, Krillin started dodging them, as aptly as he had Yamcha's attacks earlier. And even if one or two hit, alone, they were way too weak to cause any damage or even disrupt his rhythm, now that he was prepared for them. He managed to run right up to Goku, within range of his fists, and pivoted on one foot to charge a punch straight to his gut. Goku managed to partially deflect it with his left hand and accompanied it by spinning on his right foot, lessening the damage and gaining momentum for a kick with his other leg, that Krillin managed to barely parry. The bald kid went in for another attack, this time kicking upwards, but Goku reacted by emitting a burst of energy from his chest. It was weak and unfocused, but it was sufficient to confuse and push Krillin backwards, wildly swinging his arms to keep his balance.

At the end of the exchange, both managed to recover without falling.

There was a cheer from the bleachers as their clash replayed on a maxi screen in slow motion - it had been far too fast for anyone to follow in real time.

"You are good." admitted Krillin, a bit short on breath. "Who is your actual master?"

Goku shook his head. "I have none, as I said. I used to study with my grandpa, but he died years ago." He thought about it for a moment. "But you know, his master was Muten Roshi, the same as you."

"That can't be!" Krillin's eyes widened. "Then who taught you to use those... energy things?"
"No one did. I came up with them myself."

"What?" the kid shouted in disbelief. "How would you even do that?"

"I experimented." said Goku. "Bulma's equipment helped. It's quite easy, really, once you get the hang of it. But anything that could do real damage is too slow and too tiresome to produce during a fight, so I just thought about using them this way."

"You just fired them from your hands first!" protested Krillin. "What was that last one?"

"Your spiritual energy fills your whole body, so you can emit it from anywhere, in theory." explained the other, shrugging. "It's just easier to focus and direct if you use your hands. They have more nerve terminations and finer control."

Krillin grabbed his head between his hands. "That's just - it's basically unfair! It's like having weapons!"

"The rules allow it." observed Goku.

"Yeah, because no one could predict that something like that would exist!" shrieked the other. "Not even my master talked to me about anything like this! It doesn't count as martial arts!"

Observing the whole scene from the edge of the field, Jackie Chun caressed his beard and looked away from the ring.

Goku thought long about it. "Fine," he said, finally. "you have a point. I will not use them any more against you then."

The other did a double take. "Are you saying you think you're so strong you can win easily even without those tricks?".

"Not really. It will lower my chances of victory significantly."

"So what? Don't you care about winning?"

His opponent was somehow getting angrier at any turn, no matter what he said, realised Goku. There's no making some people happy. "Bulma would be happy if I did, I guess." he said, shrugging. "But me? Not much. I was just looking for a chance to train."

"That's absurd! And someone like you stands on this ring, in the semifinals? When I had to bust my ass training for months just to get to enter?" shouted Krillin, completely outraged. "You can not be allowed to win!"

"Wait, what did I...?"

Krillin jumped forward again. The previous bout had left him with the feeling that even without energy blasts Goku was physically stronger than him. However, his technique was highly unusual. Just like he had done with the Ox King, Krillin realised - even now, this kid was trying to just push him out of the ring without hurting him too much. And if that was his approach to this fight, well, it would be also his downfall. After all, Krillin had no shortage of experience fighting dirty.

"Hey, it's shorty! Still haven't dropped out of the Temple?"

Goku went for a grab on Krillin's right arm, which was exactly what he had expected when he had left that opening on purpose. His left fist hit Goku right next to the ear, causing him to shout in pain
and leaving him stunned for a moment.

"Maybe we should give you some incentive. A bit of sparring between friends."

The next feint didn't work, but that was alright. After all, this one had two layers - and when Goku went to parry the fist that would have been the most obvious follow-up, it was a kick to the shins that took away his ground instead.

"Let's make this three on one. I'm sure you can take it, yeah?"

The feints got deeper and deeper. They didn't all work, but still, Goku was being pushed back. Sure, he was strong, but he was taking more blows than he was dishing out. That had to take a toll on him. And he was with his back to the edge of the ring now. It would end with the next exchange.

"I CAN'T LOSE HERE!" shouted Krillin, charging for the final attack. "I HAVE TO WIN!"

There was a smell of dust and sweat mixed together in the small storage room where old gym equipment was stuffed. Mai was still catching her breath, tired out by her fight with Giran. Her right shoulder in particular, where the cybernetic socket from which she had detached her prosthetic arm was installed, was burning with pain. The effort alone had been notable, and Giran's pull must have torn some of her muscles there.

But more than all of that, defeat was what caused Mai more pain.

Sure, she had grabbed the Dragon Ball. But that was a meagre consolation prize. She had exposed herself and left Giran alive, and he had been retrieved by Bulma and the others. And Giran knew a lot about the Instruments - way more than they were comfortable with the world at large knowing, at this stage of their plans. It didn't matter if he talked of his own will, now that the facade of neutrality of the ptero tribe had been dropped, or if the info was otherwise dragged out of him. This could be a lethal blow to their organization.

She had sent the report back through the transmitter she had in her shoulder socket. All she had to do was thinking it in a certain form of hand sign language, and her motor nerves would do the rest. She still waited for further orders, whether they would be to go finish Giran off or to turn herself in to an officer for execution as punishment for her failure.

The small engine inside the socket started vibrating, relaying the answer back in code.

"So you failed."

"Yes, Piano. I will accept any-

"Shut up. This isn't Piano. I'm Clarinet, I'm field commander for this operation at the Tournament. Since Commander Red had to insist to come here, we mixed up with the guard. Good thing we did too, since obviously you can't be trusted with shit."

"...

"Now listen. If it was for me, I'd have you shot, but unfortunately I can't. You're Piano's pet, he gets to make that call. But thanks to your blunder now we have to accelerate our plans. We're coming out in the open."
"Already?"

"Yes, since you forced our hand. We need to make use of the advantage of surprise while it lasts. Now listen. The plan requires us to take over as much of the assets of the Red Ribbon as possible. That didn't change, but since we were planning to do four months from now, it's going to be less than we expected. However this day gives us also a priceless chance to get an unexpected prize."

"Commander Red's life."

"So you're not as incompetent as your mission record seems to indicate. Yes, obviously. Him and his aide as a bonus, if possible. Unfortunately, Black is careful, as always. We're here to escort them but he's the only one who gets to stay next to the Commander. We can easily kill the other Ribbon soldiers, but in the confusion, Red might manage to get away."

"Then what are your orders?"

"I thought it would be obvious. Do you still carry that capsule sniper rifle of yours?"

---

"I CAN'T LOSE HERE!" shouted Krillin, charging for the final attack. "I HAVE TO WIN!"

Goku knew there and then that if he didn't put his all into stopping him and counterattacking now, he'd be defeated.

This shouldn't have bothered him too much. Winning a sports event was certainly not important enough to risk injuring someone, even if they had put themselves in harm's way of their own will. He had gotten his fill of fighting and could spar more later with his fellow test subjects at Capsule Corporation, there was no danger whatsoever to his life or health, nor for any of his friends'. Bulma had already gotten what she needed out of this tournament. For all practical purposes, he could go down now and nothing bad would happen. It didn't matter.

And yet.

The last bouts had left him feeling a slight sense of annoyance. Like hearing something so obviously wrong and knowing you could rectify the mistake quite easily but somehow never getting the chance to say it out loud. He could answer Krillin's tactics so much better if he just let go and went all out. And if he did, what would Krillin answer then? Would he just crumble, or could he develop even more, come up with even more creative feints, maybe ones that even he couldn't see coming for once? The possibility fascinated Goku - he couldn't help but feel his blood pulsating, his brain thinking faster and faster in the rush of the moment, projecting all possible scenarios, all attacks and counters and counters to those counters. Maybe he could fight without caring much about victory, but even if they fought again, would Krillin be able to reach this stage if he did not? If all his passions and hopes didn't push him to do the very best that he could do, to achieve a level of physical and mental performance he may never again be able to match?

The realisation of how ephemeral this single moment was for both of them hit Goku.

And with it he finally understood how he'd been hurting his opponent far harder than any fists could.

"I'm sorry", he said, "but neither can I."

He dodged Krillin's attack, ignoring all the openings that could be traps of all sorts. He went for a straight hit from an angle his opponent could easily guard. And when he did, Goku's fist simply
smacked his arm with enough violence to send him tumbling back on the ring. Defence was of no consequence if he could smash through it with sheer strength.

Krillin jumped back up, pretty much unfazed. "So you got serious?" he said, with a smirk.

Their clash renewed. It had gotten twice as hard for Krillin, because now Goku's movements were far harder to exploit. He kept going not for the safest hit, but for the most efficient and painful, and when it connected, it hurt like hell. Krillin parried less and dodged more, as otherwise the damage he would take would still be significant. But he still could read Goku's movements quite well - he may have changed objectives, but his style was not that different, just faster. And for every blow, there was an idea on how to give it back. Even when he noticed blood dripping down his brow, he didn't give it a second thought besides making sure it wouldn't go in his eye.

He had thought back to his bullies back in Korin Temple earlier, but now he could realise how nothing he'd experienced had ever been further than that. As he kept surprising himself at the things he could come up with, the things his own body seemed to do of its own accord, as years of training for each individual movement and muscle clicked together like a puzzle, he realised his greatest wish right now wasn't to win the Tournament - it was for this match to never end.

_The sky sure is pretty_, thought Krillin. Wait, why was he thinking about the sky? In fact, why was he looking straight at it? Had he not been doing something rather different until a moment ago? It was almost as if time had skipped a beat there.

"...and ten! The winner is Goku!"

Krillin chuckled. _Stupid announcer. We're still fighting. I only need to get up and go back to the battle._

"Are you okay?" Goku's round face appeared right above his eyes. "I hit your head and you just went out cold."

"I'm fine." replied Krillin, annoyed. "Just get out of the way and let me look at the sky."

The other seemed puzzled, but in the end did as told. Krillin got back his view.

It took him a while for reality to finally sink in. By that time the crowd was cheering and chanting, and he was being helped back to his feet.

_I lost._

Suddenly, he started crying. Not even discreetly, he was bawling messily and without restraint. He was sad and angry, full of this feeling of having grasped _something_ and have it slip out of his fingers right when he thought he could grab it and claim it as his. But when Goku came to him for the customary salute, he wiped his eyes and returned his bow. He didn't feel angry at him; he felt grateful. Even what he had lost, without him, he would never have had in the first place.

From the edge of the ring, for some reason, Jackie Chun looked at him, beaming with pride.

"Hi dad."

"Hi dear! How is your Tournament going? I've been watching it on TV. Goku and that other boy gave quite the spectacle."
"Oh, yes, it's going swimmingly. I have collected all the data I needed, and the matches are fun. I'm a bit disappointed at Yamcha and the others' performance, but well, nothing's perfect. Too bad you and mom couldn't come in person."

"I would have, but you know how she is with blood after that whole experience with-"

"I understand. Anyway, it's all going smoothly here! No need to worry whatsoever!"

"All smoothly, hm?"

"..."

"What happened after the fourth fight? You know, the forfeit. It took a lot of time to start the next match."

"Oh, that. As Max said, just a minor accident."

"Bulma..."

"...one of the contestants was shot."

"..."

"By the same person who killed me back then."

"..."

"The attacker is still at large."

"Bulma-"

"I know, okay? It's not like I actively look for trouble! Most of the time. Definitely not this one! Listen, we're on top of this. There's an oath the contestants have to uphold, to enforce the rules and punish any wrongdoers. We have some of the strongest martial artists of the world here backing us up, looking for her. And it's not like she has a reason to come after me any more. I'll be fine."

"I hope you can say the same of everyone there. Why did you not evacuate the place?"

"Because it'd help her escape."

"Then call the police!"

"We have. But on this island there's only two cops, and the most dangerous criminal they've ever confronted was a serial chicken thief who in the end turned out to be a particularly cunning weasel. They've called reinforcements from the mainland, and it will take a while for them to arrive. By the way, how did you suspect there was trouble to begin with? Don't tell me that you know when I'm hiding something or anything like that."

"I had some suspicions. Your old, ahem, friend was from the Red Ribbon, right?"

"Yes. So I hear."

"Right. At one point the camera took a shot of the public, and just slightly at the edge of the field of vision, leaning from his seat to buy popcorn, there was someone I think I've seen in the news in the past. I think it was Commander Red."
"The Commander of the Red Ribbon army, one of the most guarded men on the planet, coming to a freaking sports event, buying popcorn? Come on, no way!"

"That's what I thought. But if trouble is brewing, who knows, it may be really him. You should check the public to make sure."

"...I guess it won't cost us much to look. Ok, will do. Thanks, dad."

"No problem. Stay safe, dear."

"Of course. When do I not?"

"...you know, Bulma, I'm not even going to try answering that."

"And after a fight of blooming youth comes one of wizened experience! Both are a mystery - we have never seen the face of the first, while the second did not have to show any of his tricks yet thanks to a convenient forfeit! Walking in for the second semifinal, it's INARI-SAN vs. JACKIE CHUN!"

The two old men walked out of the antechamber and slowly stepped to the ring. Jackie Chun, or rather, Muten, was rather intrigued by the question of who could this person he was about to fight possibly be. Having seen him defeat Giran, he had no doubt about his skill - this was no novice. Yet he was also confident that he would have been aware of all martial artists alive of that age and level of skill. Of course, given his sister's abilities, there was no guarantee this person needed to be someone alive at all; in fact, even though the light of the day made it hard to see, he thought he could distinguish a faint halo hovering above his head if he focused his eyes. For all he knew, Inari-san could be a fighter from aeons ago whose memory in the present day was all but lost. Yet if that was the case, he was also remarkably stoic and able to keep his wits in front of modern wonders such as the maxi screen that was showing their faces to the stadium right behind them.

"Are you curious about my identity?," asked Inari-san, his voice muffled and slightly distorted by the mask, and yet somehow familiar. "Here's a proposal. I'll tell you who I am if you forfeit."

Jackie raised an eyebrow. "What a strange request. What makes you think I would do something like that?"

"Worth a shot," replied the other, with a light chuckle. "Given the outcome of the previous fight, I thought your job here might be done. But I guess you're still too much of a proud old man for that."

"Quite. Seeing those youths fight has made my blood boil a bit."

"Well then. Best of luck, my friend. I'll have to do this the hard way."

They took their respective positions and stances, across the ring. That exchange had only made Muten's suspicions grow, but he quieted it all for now, in preparation for the fight. After all, to hide one's face may be easy, but to hide one's style is much harder. If he pushed his opponent hard enough, the truth would have to come out.

"Ready? FIGHT!"

They didn't jump to the offensive immediately. Rather, they started circling around, slowly, observing each other while keeping a safe distance. How did the other move, how did he breathe and
pace himself; Muten would soak all of that in, together with the terrain under his own feet, any irregularities or flaws that might come useful later. And he was sure that the other was doing the same. *He's been taught well,* he thought.

Then they moved together towards one another, and while to the crowd the exchange must have seemed thrilling, Muten knew very well this was just them barely probing each other's defences. Each move was followed by its most natural counter, and even after several blows and parries, nothing had happened that he couldn't predict from the very beginning, like in a choreographed dance. With one last fluid movement and a small jump, he withdrew from the clash as soon as the flow seemed close to being disrupted, and so did his opponent, with neither being a single step closer to gaining an advantage. The stadium erupted in cheers.

"You belong to this era." said Jackie Chun. "You seem to know far too well the style of the Turtle school."

"So do you." commented the other, bemused. "I wonder why that is?"

Jackie Chun didn't answer, and simply attacked again. It went similarly to the previous exchange for a while, but then he thought it was time to enact his plan. He kicked upwards towards his opponent's chin, but did so from a purposefully miscalculated distance. The most natural reaction would have been to ignore the kick, that would miss, and exploit the resulting opening. That is, it would have been the most natural reaction from a man who's not used to wearing a mask in a fight.

Inari-san almost fell for it. He did not care to parry and was readying a counter blow until right before Jackie's foot was about to connect. But then he must have realised - that even without hitting his face, the kick would crack or remove the mask - and did something Muten did not expect. He jumped and threw himself forward, taking the full brunt of the kick in his chest. He was sent straight to the ground, but his face was still a secret.

"Ouch!" shouted Max. "That looks painful! Let's see if he can get back on his feet."

Jackie Chun scoffed at the commenter's inexperience. Indeed, before the referee could even begin to count, Inari-san was already dusting off his clothes. Still, it seemed like he was willing to go to unexpected lengths to protect his identity.

"That was not very nice of you." commented the masked man. "Would you like me to rip your wig in front of your pupil?"

Jackie frowned. His eyes darted quickly to the edge of the field, where indeed, a now recovered Krillin was avidly taking in the whole scene.

"What is your objective?" he asked, brusquely. "You seem an excellent, honourable fighter. Yet you keep trying to get to me in these petty ways. What could it be that you're going after that matters more than fighting a fair battle?"

"In any other circumstance, I would love having this battle last as much as necessary." replied the other. "But today, I have little time, and something more important to do. As I said before, your job here is done. But mine is not, **Master.**"

Jackie's voices trembled slightly. "There are only a few who would call me that." he said.

"Indeed."

"And only one I can think of who would know who I am under this disguise."
"Took me a few years, that one."

"So, for you, it's the other boy?"

Inari-san nodded. "It is, indeed. Will you let me fight him?"

The old master thought about it for a few moments. "No," he finally said. "I will be selfish, maybe, but as a master, I can not pass on this chance to put you to a last test. Pass, and I will let you have your way."

"Always like that with you, isn't it?" the masked man laughed. "Very well. I am ready."

With a single movement, Jackie Chun ripped off his upper body's clothes. Then, slowly, his chest and arm muscles started accumulating energy, glowing, and swelling up. The air became charged, and those closest to the ring could feel their hair standing up for the static electricity. Bulma, who was in the commenter's cabin looking over security camera close-ups of the public, dropped everything and simply gaped at the ring. There were a few remote scanners that she had pointed on it, that weren't very sensitive and could only pick up the strongest signs of spiritual energy. Their readings were almost off scale.

"That looks dangerous," commented Inari-san.

"Only if you can't stop it. If you think it's too much, you can give up now." Jackie Chun brought his hands together in a cup shape, then drew them to his side.

"No, that's about right." replied the other, and repeated the same gesture.

The readings on the scanners increased yet again.

The viewers had been enthusiastic, but now were falling again into either awestruck silence, or actual fear. The ground was slightly shaking as Jackie Chun's hands started glowing.

"Kame..." he recited, in a raspy, strained voice.

For once that day, Commander Red and Staff Officer Black had the same reaction to something they were seeing on the ring. Both were staring, transfixed, unable to speak.

"Hame..." continued Jackie Chun.

From the borderlines, few understood what was going on. Goku watched fascinated, observing carefully every movement and gesture. Krillin was shouting in outrage and disbelief at how none of that could possibly be allowed.

"HAAAA!"

With a last scream, Jackie Chun propelled his hands forward, emitting a bright stream of energy from them. Meanwhile, Inari-san had gone through the same motions, and did the same. The two beams met midway through, pushing each other and coalescing into a single, blindingly bright globe. Bulma watched as terrified as she'd been that one time with Goku on the roof of Capsule Corporation, when she'd realised how much destructive potential was contained in his little body. That in front of them was enough energy to blow up the entire stadium and everyone in it, probably. Worse, it was proof that these powers she was exploring were nothing new to the world of the most experienced martial artists. They just were usually very good at keeping their secrets, apparently.

The energy sphere stayed in perfect equilibrium for a moment, the two pushes on either side
matching each other with unerring precision. Then, simultaneously, both its controllers turned their hands upwards, redirecting the streams. The glowing ball was tossed up in the sky, and eventually disappeared from sight. In the stadium, calm came back, as the two contenders breathed heavily to recover from the effort while most of the public simply gaped wondering what the hell had they just witnessed.

Then, finally, Jackie Chun's voice rung through the stadium. "I surrender!" he shouted.

The spell now broken, cheers, claps and clamouring resuming across the public, all while Brother Max incoherently rambled about everything that had just happened and how nothing of it made sense but it was also surely the most awesome thing he'd ever seen in his entire career. Amidst the chaos, Jackie Chun walked out of the ring, passing next to his opponent on the way.

"Go fight the boy, Son Gohan." he said, smiling. "I hope he's as good a pupil as you were for me."

The masked man bowed. "Thank you, Master Muten. For this, and everything else."

Behind the ring, on top of the building that hosted the contestants before their turn to fight came, was a thatched roof, a large sign, and a demon mask. From there it was possible to get a clear view of the whole extent of the new, enlarged bleachers from which the public watched the fights. There was a small crawl space under the roof, but it was not used regularly, and the only way into it was a small service hatch used by workers who needed to carry out repairs. Inside this small space, hunched under the slanted roof where it was so low standing was impossible, was Mai.

Leaving her previous hiding place had not been easy, and in fact she was worried someone would eventually find her. But she had been lucky as during the last fight at a certain point something had happened so spectacular and noisy that it had drawn everyone’s attention for a few, precious seconds - and then she had managed to dart out of the closet and climb into the roof. Now she was in a more secure position, and one in which she hoped no one would look for her for a while. Most importantly, one perfectly suited for her new task.

With a click, she made the capsule she was carrying pop open, and it revealed a metal case packing a sniper rifle of the same model of the one she had used against Goku months ago. Assembling it with only one working hand wasn't easy, and more than once she had to help herself with her mouth to clamp on one on another piece while she slid or screwed it into place. But at the end, it was complete and standing on its own tripod, and carefully, she pushed the muzzle through the straw, right behind the thin wooden sign.

Next came the aiming. She couldn't rely on just her sight because of the sign being in the way, and she couldn't aim properly with only one hand, but it wouldn't be necessary. The target was static and close. She knew what his seat number was, and a few observations through the straw could give her the bearings of where that was supposed to be. All she needed to do was run the numbers, take into account wind, air resistance and all the smaller effects, point the gun in the right direction, and fire, without even looking.

Slowly, methodically, she begun arranging her assassination of Commander Red.

Chapter End Notes
Sorry for the long delay, it's been some stressful times. I hope I can get the next chapter out in a more reasonable time, and then maybe take a break before the next arc. Thank you all for reading!
"Found him."

Another of the organizational improvements to the Tournament that Capsule Corporation had paid for was a small closed-circuit security camera system throughout the bleachers and other areas frequented by the public. Of the many reasons why Bulma had thought it a good idea, the possibility of needing to identify a major military figure amidst the public was not one of them.

"Well, I'll be damned." said Bulma, her eyes switching between the camera image and the photo they had grabbed from the internet, referring to one of the few public appearances of the man. "That really is him."

She and Brother Wei, together with the Ox King, a couple more monks, and the island's two cops who had just arrived, were gathered right in the middle of an ancient hall with finely carved rock walls, all around the desk on which, rather incongruously, stood the computers receiving the cameras' stream. A face recognition software had run quickly through all the spectators the cameras had managed to film, and sure enough, there he was, Commander Red himself, in a ridiculously gaudy flowery shirt, munching on popcorn, without a care in the world. While he was not considered an outright criminal, the legal status of the Red Ribbon being somewhat in a grey area, it was still very unusual to see the leader of such a shady mercenary organisation participating in a public event with such abandon.

And considering what had just happened, it was out of the question that he was only there to have a good time.

"So, what do we do now?" asked Bulma.

"We have them arrested, obviously!" blurted out Wei, purple in his face with outrage. "These... desecrators! If these were the old times, they'd get a public lashing in front of the crowd."

The cops shifted on their feet uncomfortably. "Now, now." said one of them. "They haven't done anything bad per se yet."

"What more do they need to do!" shouted the monk. "Their goon has tried to kill one of the contestants!"

"No, I agree, we can't prove it's them." mumbled Bulma, shaking her head. "I'm sure they've taken their precautions. They wouldn't do something like this without having plausible deniability."
The man threw his hands into the air, exasperated. "Then would you let them roam free?"

"That's not what I'm saying." Bulma tapped a few keys, running more searches on all the faces of the spectators near to the man. A pinging sound announced the success of one of them. Next to the Commander Red was seating the second highest ranking officer of all the Red Ribbon, Staff Officer Black. He was harder to pinpoint because he'd been photographed only once - by sheer luck, as he quickly ushered his boss into a limousine with tinted windows. "These guys must be up to something, that much is for sure. But they're also going to want to keep their hands clean. They won't risk doing anything to us."

The cops nodded along vigorously, patently relieved.

"So how do we find out what is it that they're doing here?" pressed on Wei.

The girl smiled. "Maybe I should go ask them in person."

"And now, for the final! The last fight! The moment that will decide who truly is the Best Under The Heavens! It all led to this moment, and what a clash! A mature, experienced fighter versus a rising young prodigy, the youngest fighter in this tournament! Both achieved nearly effortless wins in their quarter finals, and had to sweat for their victory in the semifinals! Both have abilities and powers that frankly defy all we thought was even possible! We can't expect anything but the most epic, mind-bending fight from two such geniuses clashing on the ring - no pressure guys! Let me hear your enthusiasm for GOKU vs. INARI-SAN!"

Brother Max exhausted the last remaining strength of his vocal cords in that one single scream, that blended together with the crowd chanting enthusiastically and cheering. Goku and Inari-san walked up to the ring quietly. The sun was close to setting by now, and the red light and long shadows set the mood perfectly for what promised to be a duel of legends. The whole scene would have been far more solemn, though, had Goku not been scratching his butt again.

"Well, good luck, boy."

Goku did a double take, turning around at that sentence, but the old man was already going to his starting position. Had he even heard right? That voice had sounded like something old, something familiar.

"And now that our contestants are in place it is time! No holding back anything now! Use all the strength you've got left to claim the title everyone craves! BEGIN!"

They jumped simultaneously - Inari-san forwards, and Goku sideways. Where he had been previously, a stream of his tiny ki blasts was now waiting, like a swarm of mosquitoes. They immediately focused on the opponent, attacking him from all sides. A few hit without doing much, but Inari-san was already stepping forward, used to ignoring them, when one which carried significantly more energy struck him right above his hip, forcing him to tap the ground with his leg, and disrupting his pace.

Goku used the time gained to dodge again and repeat the attack, but this time Inari-san didn't try to either dodge or tank the ki blasts. Rather, he deflected them, waving his hands deftly around his body in intricate patterns almost impossible to see with the naked eye. Not only they didn't hit, Goku had to make a few of those sharply turn around before they actually hit him back. The distraction and surprise were enough however to make him lose a fraction of a second in reacting to his opponent himself, who now was upon him, a hand raised for a vertical chop. No time to dodge it completely. Goku raised his own arm to meet the opponent's and parried, right above his head.
"You really have got a clever technique there, boy," said Inari-san. "You're a smart fighter. But smart isn't enough for me."

Goku tried to disengage again, but a kick to his side as he did so sent him down on the pavement.

"Stop trying to run. Fight me head-on, like you did that kid."

The boy raised his eyes to meet the enigmatic mask of the old man. He pondered it for a moment, whether he should do just that. It had been easy, before. He had managed to fight with more abandon, without hurting his opponent, without turning into a beast made of pure instinct out for blood. But Krillin had been an easier opponent, and even then, seeing him black out after a well placed punch had sent a cold shiver down Goku's spine. Now he could tell from what he'd seen already that this was not someone he could take lightly. In fact, it was someone who was probably stronger than him.

He pushed the thought back. He still had more to try, and he still did not want to win that badly. But one thing was true, and it was that ranged attacks, alone, would not do much. He needed to get close.

He didn't need to let his opponent know, though, so at first he waited for him to attack and made to jump sideways like he'd done twice already. But this time the step was a fake - and when his opponent reacted by turning sideways immediately, it was him who exposed his flank to Goku, who had effectively remained in place. He plunged himself against that opening, but was met by a well-placed kick.

"You thought I'd really fall for that?"

He had approximately one second before regaining a foothold and being able to counterattack. He frantically ran possible attack patterns. There had to be one where he would not see him coming, where he could just land even a single, clean hit.

"You know what your problem is, boy?"

He had just tapped the ground with one foot, had decided on what to do, was starting to shift his momentum, but again the conditions had changed, again the old man had caught up with him.

"You think too much."

The sweep kick struck his ankle, took the little stability he'd just gained away from him. Again he was in the air, again unable to control his momentum, at the mercy of inertia and his opponent's whims. A one-two series of punches struck him, face and chest, and he tumbled disastrously on the ground. Goku got up, short of breath, and feeling the smell of blood. He checked his nose to find that it was dripping.

"Don't get me wrong, thinking is good. Thinking is great, in fact." said Inari-san, standing with his arms tucked behind his back. He seemed amused. "But there's a time for thinking, and it's not in between one punch and the other. Your mind must do the thinking in advance and teach it to your body so that when it's time, it doesn't even need to ask. You get me?"

Still catching his breath, Goku nodded. He got him alright. He remembered receiving some very similar lessons, once.

"You're doing just great with inferior opponents. But with someone on your level, that little delay between I want and I do, that's all the difference between victory and defeat."

"So make use of it," said Goku, "and win."
The old man laughed. It was hearty, not mockery. Like he was having a genuine good time.

"My boy," he said, "and where would be the fun in that?"

Staff Officer Black noticed that something was wrong a couple of minutes in advance. First it had been Yamcha, that contestant who now was for some reason perched on top of the commentator's tower. Suspicious enough in its own right, but now he had clearly turned and looked at them for a moment, to then quickly avert his eyes when he realised they were looking back. As if someone had alerted him to their presence.

Then he saw the people heading their way. Bulma, obviously, recognizable by her bright blue hair that shone in the light and you could spot from a mile away, and with her a monk and two cops. They were marching up the stairs among the rows, and Black could tell there was a sense of urgency to their step. The girl wasn't even sparing the ring a look, and it was her champion that was fighting it out there. He quickly glanced around to see if they could make a discreet escape, but the only way to the main entrance was cut already. Besides, from a different stair was climbing another contestant, the massive bearded guy from the first round. Breaking such a blockade with force, in the middle of a crowd, decided Black, was just not possible.

He checked out his boss; Commander Red was still admiring the show, rooting for the masked man to beat up the kid, blissfully unaware. There wasn't much to gain from informing him at this point, he concluded. Whatever these people wanted, it was not likely to end in violence. And even with the cops in tow, he really doubted they had anything to arrest them for.

They indeed walked right up to their seats. Only then did Commander Red finally notice something, and turned to look at the new arrivals, with mild irritation.

"Mr. Black? Mr. Red?" asked the girl to the forefront of the group. "We need to talk."

"Up, up, now down! Stay on guard!"

Goku was furiously parrying and dodging as the old man pressed him on, unleashing a flurry of blows that would have been entirely impossible for him to avoid if he hadn't been calling them outright. Inari-san's technique was flawless, and despite his apparent age, his strength and stamina appeared unlimited. Forced to engage at close range, Goku had been slowly pushed on the defensive, yet whenever the edge of the ring would get too close, he would manage to get a break and regain some breathing space.

He was very much suspecting the old man was letting him.

"Next is one hit from the right! Better watch out!"

Inari-san's left leg flew in a spinning kick over Goku's head; he was ready to counter-attack when he realised that the right leg was following suit. In a desperate move, he tossed himself aside, rolling with the hit to absorb the blow. He hit the ground, and despite all the care taken, it wasn't painless. But at least he could get back up again.

"That wasn't one hit," he said, "it was two."

Inari-san chuckled. "Oops. Must have mixed it up there." He renewed his attack. There was no mistaking it: his attacks weren't just predictable, they were didactic. He would etch one pattern into Goku's defensive habits, then modify it in some way, or insert some randomness, or speed it up until he was barely able to keep up. It was both a lesson and a test, and Goku realised he wasn't doing all
too good.

He knew how he could have done good.

Inari-san seemed to know too. He was pushing him towards that, in fact. Goku knew there always had been times in battle when he had completely surrendered himself to his instincts, abandoned all surface rational thinking, let his body and the most animal part of his brain do the thinking. He could be faster, more reactive, if he wanted. But he didn't want to. He looked at Inari-san's white mask, with three drawn whiskers per side of its cute muzzle.

The giant rabbit was lying on the ground, a hole punched straight through his head and brain. In horror, Goku snapped out of his bloodthirsty trance to see its only remaining eye staring at him, resentful. Yet the true horror was that even that wasn't true - for there was no mind any more behind it to resent anyone...

"Lost a beat there!" shouted Inari-san, exploiting the opening for a kick aimed straight at Goku's head. The kid dodged by tossing himself on the side, then cartwheeled on one hand to go back to a standing stance.

"Stop doing this!" he shouted. "I'll just surrender!"

"Too easy!" The old fighter jumped straight towards Goku, this time presenting an opening himself. He could get a blow in, if only he was faster...

He didn't take the chance - he retreated instead, tried a different angle, playing it safe. "Don't push me to that point!," shouted the kid, "I could kill you!"

"All you could do is try!" replied Inari-san, with a laugh. "So try away!"

His next fist came right towards Goku's face, and he dodged without thinking. His body and mind were both growing tired, and as they had less and less energy to expend, they were inevitably sliding towards their most natural, most efficient form. The pain was coursing through his whole body now, dull but ever present, both from the blows he had taken and from the continued exertion his muscles had been subject to. Patterns in movements and attacks were blurring one over the other in his mind. More than anything, he was feeling irritated at this old man, at his taunting, at his prodding and pushing him. He was tired, more than anything, of holding back. Even with Krillin he had not needed to go too far. It would have been so much easier to just give this opponent what he wanted.

For the first time in the fight, Inari-san had to seriously exert himself to dodge a punch. That had been a wink faster than he had gotten used to.

"Oh. You're getting in the mood?"

Goku silently nodded. "Can I trust you?" he asked.

Inari-san took a defensive stance. "With your own life."

"Good. I'll trust you with yours."

Goku darted forward, and this time he didn't speak any more. His eyes were focused on his opponent, and no movement was wasted. Inari-san went to parry a flurry of punches, but Goku's hands grabbed his wrists instead, and he pushed himself off them to strike with a kick at the opponent's face, forcing him to throw himself to the ground to avoid it, except now the kid jumped on top of him.
"Almost got me!" shouted Inari-san, as he struck the boy in his belly with a kick. He was tossed away, but didn't much flinch, and was almost immediately back on the offensive. This time he waved his arms around while running to his opponent and fired off a fan of small ki blasts to surround himself, like a shield.

"Your control of spiritual energy is remarkable," noted Inari-san, "but you lack power."

His fist plunged right through the front part of the sphere, swatting away the globelets of energy like mosquitoes, but the blasts made the direction of his attack all too obvious, and Goku deflected it. Now he engaged Inari-san in a close quarters brawl, punch after punch, with his ki blasts flying around and serving as if they were additional fists, not replacing his physical attack like usual, but enhancing and complementing them.

"Well, that-"

A blast struck Inari-san's mask. The wood cracked and chipped under the blow, and the mask itself shifted slightly, obstructing his vision. He was blinded to Goku's movements for one instant, as his hands instinctively went to his face, to put the mask back in place and prevent it from being blasted away altogether. But one instant was more than he could afford to concede. A series of punches from Goku connected with his solar plexus, taking the breath out of him, and then a straight kick sent him flying. The old man tumbled gracelessly on the stone pavement and was on his way to fall out of the ring. With a shout and a jerking motion, he suddenly jammed his fingers into the marble, punching five holes in it and gripping it fiercely. He came to a stop, one leg already dangling out of the edge. With a pirouette, he got back on his feet. Goku stared at him, immobile, all the fight having seemingly left him.

"Well, what's gotten into you?" said the old man, amused. "Should have pressed on, my guard was down."

The wooden mask, shattered in two neat halves, lay on the ground, next to his feet.

"Oh, bugger." he mumbled.

Goku blinked, and his voice was trembling when he finally spoke.

"...grandpa?"

"And now contestant Goku seems to be running towards his opponent, and grabbing him with a deadly lock that looks... a lot... like a hug. Yes, he's hugging Inari-san! And crying! Well, I surely expected emotions to run strong through this final, but this was not what I had in mind!"

Bulma turned a moment to the ring upon hearing the strange comment by Max, and surely, she saw Goku bawling desperately while hugging his opponent, who had lost his mask and revealed the face of a serene old man with a massive white moustache. Having heard about how Baba could bring the dead back for a day earlier on, she was quick to connect the dots, so more than surprised, she felt happy for Goku. For the fraction of a second that her current interlocutor allowed her to, anyway.

"Hey, don't dare look away while we're talking!"

The angry little red haired man was snarling at her with contempt from all of his height, namely, approximately at the level of Bulma's chest. Man, was it hard to take him seriously.

"I paid for the bleachers you're sitting on, so if you don't mind, I'll dare what pleases me." snapped
back Bulma. "Especially when you've still failed to explain your motives for being here."

"This is just a company trip! You tell her, Black."

The Staff Officer sighed. "This is just a company trip." he repeated, flatly.

Brother Wei scoffed. "Your deceptions are pathetic, like a child's. You would have more dignity just admitting to the truth!"

"I admit to nothing!" shouted back Red. "What do you even think you can accuse me of?"

"You tried to sabotage the tournament!" snapped back Bulma. "We know all too well what's happened right before the last quarter final, and the part you guys played in it!"

The man's face got flushed with indignation and rage. "For your information, that toilet was already clogged before I used it!" he shouted.

"Don't play dumb! You know what I'm talking about! Your soldier in the quarter finals-"

"Quarter finals? Our soldiers were all eliminated in the preliminary rounds!"

"Ah-ha! So you do admit you are up to something!"

"What? No! They were just taking the chance to exercise a bit, practice the noble art of fighting! Tell them, Black!"

The Staff Officer's stare was now lost into the distance, hopeless. A melancholic glance contemplating the full moon that had just risen in the dusky sky, and the futility of the human condition. "They were just taking the chance to exercise a bit." he confirmed, his voice as empty as his heart.

"Exercise, you say?"

Bulma pulled out her phone and tapped a few commands. She brought up a still frame of a video, magnifying it to show only one specific detail, the face of a woman with short black hair and red eyeliner.

"This is contestant Mai, the eighth finalist who did not show up." hissed the girl. "The photo has been taken at the preliminary rounds. She has already been known to associate with an organisation with... subversive objectives, with the aim to steal something from them. She also has assaulted and attempted to kill contestant Giran right after his match against Inari-san. And we know she has a past as a member of the Red Ribbon. Anything to say?"

Commander Red huffed dismissively. "I've never seen the woman!"

Bulma was preparing an appropriately snarky response when she felt her phone being snatched from her hand by much stronger fingers. "Hey!" she protested, but Staff Officer Black didn't hear her, as he was staring intently at the photo, back to his full concentration.


Bulma raised her eyebrows. "What now? You'll pretend she's acting on her own?"

But Black didn't answer, in fact he didn't concern himself with Bulma any more at all. Instead, he turned to his Commander.
"We need to go." he said. "This place is not safe any more."

"What are you talking about, Black? Who the Hell is Lieutenant-"

He couldn't finish his sentence. A mighty roar shook the stadium, drowning his words and all other noises, and drawing all eyes towards the ring again.

Inari-san, or rather, Son Gohan, had managed to dodge or parry almost all of Goku's attacks until then, but the jump with which he was upon him, hugging him dearly while screaming his name and crying was so quick and sudden he couldn't have avoided it even if he wanted it. Good thing, then, that he thought he owed it to the boy. Not very becoming of a final match of the Tenkaichi Tournament, but what the hell. If getting old teaches you to stop caring so much about what others think of you, being dead really seals the deal.

"Grandba!" managed to articulate Goku, finally, when his bawling had gotten at least under control enough for him to form normal words. "I misshed you sho much! I thought I... I killed..."

He couldn't bear to finish that sentence, the poor boy. Gohan shook his head. It broke his heart to have to explain.

"Goku," he started, "you must understand-"

"I know!" shouted back the kid. "I was dangerous, I hurt you, and you went away because-"

"No!" the old man pushed Goku a bit away from him, grabbing his shoulders. "Goku, no, don't think that. I wouldn't have done that, ever. Come on."

The boy sniffled a bit, nodding. He was still shaking, and Gohan thought well to hug him again in the hopes of calming him down. The next bit wouldn't be easy to explain.

The stadium had fallen into silence. No doubt, they couldn't really make out what was happening on the bleachers, and the microphones were turned off, so the scene must have been puzzling, but their gestures alone must have made the sense of what was going on clear enough.

"Goku," whispered the old man, "I'm sorry, really - but see me, watch me, I'm fine, yes? But that night, you, well."

How does one put something like that nicely?

"You did kill me," he blurted out.

Goku's eyes widened, horrified. He tried to wrestle himself out of Gohan's arms, but the grandpa wrapped him tighter.

"It's all right. It's all right." he said. "I've gone to Heaven, you know. It's a really nice place."

"How?" asked Goku, sobbing. "Did someone bring you back to life already? I swear, I was going to, I just was not sure if-"

"Goodness, no, Goku! I don't need that. And more chances on Earth for this old man to sin?" he chuckled. "No, the witch Baba can bring us back. It's just one day. Just one day, just now and here, but I needed to come. Of all days in all of eternity, Goku, I needed to be here today, you see. To tell you something. Will you listen?"

The boy agreed, silently, and he let him go. He was drying his tears now, and had retrieved his cool,
standing compunct in front of him to listen. Gohan was sure he must still be stirring with emotions, but if that kid had always been good at something, it was controlling his own heart, maybe too much even.

The old man and the kid stood one in front of another. He needed to find it in himself now, the strength to say those words, those words he had crossed the boundary of death to be here to speak.

*Say it, you old goat. Come on. Look him in the eyes and say it.*

"Goku..." he started, but then he ended up chortling, "I'm sorry, I'm trying to be serious here, but it's hard with you scratching your butt that way! You've been doing that all day!"

The boy looked up with a slightly weirded out look. "It's just been... really... itching..." he said, but his voice was broken. Panting.

Gohan frowned. This didn't seem normal, and Goku himself appeared to be panicking now. Grasping for air, clasping his own chest, and scratching furiously at his backside, so furiously that his fingers came out red with blood and fragments of skin.

"Goku!" he shouted, running at his side. "What is going on?"

The boy didn't answer - he growled instead. Out of the back of his trousers, from the broken, bleeding skin that he had scratched so violently, slid out something. A monkey's tail.

"I thought someone had cut it," mumbled Gohan "It regrows, even?"

And then he turned back, to the sky, following Goku's stare. There it was, sure. The sun had not set fully yet, the sky was still purple with its last dying light, but a full moon had risen above the rim of the temple.

"Oh, damn. This is not good, not at all."

Having ripped off his own clothes, muscles swelling and rippling, Goku let out a fierce, animalistic roar that echoed through the entire stadium.

Goku's roar was so sudden and violent, it made Mai lose her steadiness for an instant. But then, she realised, here was an opportunity. All eyes in the stadium were turned to the ring, and to whatever was happening there. But she did not care. Her priority, now, was something else. As everyone was distracted, a few precious instants where reactions might be slower, and everyone might be caught by surprise, were created. Her rifle was trained on the target. Her finger gently begun squeezing the trigger. Her shoulder implant sent a message.

*I'm about to fire. Everyone act on my signal.*

"May I be damned!," shouted Commander Red, bolting from his seat, his forehead beading with cold sweat. "What in the flaming pits of Hell was *that*?"

Even without having such a theatrical reaction, those surrounding him were similarly shocked. Black's grip on the phone he'd been looking at loosened, and his hand instinctively went to his pistol, as all suspicions of treachery and intrigue were drowned by what it felt like a much more immediate danger. The cops squealed and took refuge behind the chairs of the row in front of them. The public, all around, was either gasping, paralysed, or panicking. And Bulma took all of two seconds before morphing from surprise, to horror, to urgency.
Her hand darted towards Black's, and with a quick movement, before he could realise, she had snatched back her phone. Black reacted almost instantly, though, grabbing her wrist and twisting it so that she was pulled towards him. Bulma let out a scream of pain, then suddenly jerked with speed and strength he would not have expected of such a young girl. But it was not enough to make him let go. The soldier pointed his gun at her.

"Now," he started saying, calmly, "you better explain us what exactly-"

He did not have time to finish, because a blue bolt plunged from the sky in front of him. He had seen him fight on the ring, but still, it was impossible to appreciate just how fast he was until you saw it right in front of your eyes. Standing between his gun and Bulma, in his blue gi, was Yamcha.

"You better put that weapon away." he said. "Before someone gets hurt."

"You're a couple of seconds late." commented Bulma dryly, massaging the wrist that Black had just let go.

"Hey, at least I'm early enough that he didn't shoot you," rebutted the boy. "Are you all right? Is Goku-"

Bulma put a finger in front of her lips, and Yamcha caught his tongue.

"We need to do something." she said. "Take me to the others."

"You're going nowhere," intervened Black, "until I get some answers."

Yamcha looked at him amused. "And how do you plan to stop us?"

_With the gun I'm pointing straight at your chest, you idiot_, Black thought of saying, but he did not form the words. Absurd as it was, in his mind, he doubted. He'd seen incredible things today, and he did not know the precise extent to which the powers of these fighters could go. If this was a bluff, it was really convincing.

"Don't act all cool," said Bulma. "At that distance, it would hurt quite a bit."

"Not as much as I'd hurt him afterwards," replied Yamcha with a grin.

"What are they blabbing about?" growled Commander Red, who had finally managed to unglue his eyes from Goku. "Black, Dr. Gero was right! This girl is producing some kind of - abomination! That boy on the ring, he is... he..."

He didn't find the words. Goku still looked like himself, but it was apparent that he was undergoing some kind of transformation, a painful one that it seemed to cause him great anguish. His opponent Inari-san had run to him and seemed to be whispering something in his ear, perhaps trying to calm or comfort him. The medical personnel on site were standing at the edge of the ring, puzzled and visibly frightened. The referee and the commentator didn't seem to have much to say or do about the situation either. The entire stadium was paralysed at the sight.

"We still have time," said Yamcha, "but we need to go now."

"No, you won't!" shrieked Red, in anger. "Black, shoot them! This is clearly an attempt on my life! We need to put an end to whatever it is they're doing!"

"And how would shooting us accomplish that, you imbecile?" replied Bulma. "Seriously, if this idiot is your leader, you guys are going bankrupt soon."
The Staff Officer's finger was on the trigger, but he did not fire. Both the girl and the boy in front of her seemed completely unconcerned by his weapon.

"Is whatever is happening to Goku dangerous?" he asked, slowly.

Bulma nodded. "Yes, to us all."

"Is it something you planned?"

"No."

"Do you know how to stop it?"

"Yes."

Black drew a deep breath, then lowered his gun. "Go," he said, finally. "We'll continue our conversation later."

"Black!" shrieked the Commander, out of his mind. "I gave you an order! Shoot them, or I swear, I'll shoot them myself!"

The adjutant spoke calmly. "Commander, my first duty is towards the success of the Red Ribbon, followed by your safety," he said. "If I can speak my mind, I would be glad if for once you didn't do your utmost to make it harder."

Red's eyes opened wide. His lips were trembling with rage.

"How dare you!" he shouted. "It is not your place to tell me what I should do! Now do as I say, or I swear I will put you to-"

Many times, for many years, in moments like this, Staff Officer Black had dreamed of hearing his Commander just shut up. What he had never imagined is in what twisted way his wishes would eventually come true - on the bleachers of a stadium, the sound of a gunshot still ringing in his ears, and the body of his boss falling down limply, a hole in his chest and a bloodstain spreading across some stupid, tacky hawaiaan shirt.

"Goku! Goku, focus on my voice. Try to calm down."

Goku growled, foaming at the mouth, but managed to nod. The transformation was slow - perhaps made more so by his attempts to desperately cling to his own consciousness through the beastly rage that was trying to overcome him. But ultimately, he knew, it was a lost battle. He had experienced this only a few times in his life, but each and every one of them, it had ended in the same way.

And now his adoptive grandfather was there, cradling him, trying to calm him down, to help him through it.

Goku shouted.

"Cut my tail," he said, with a raspy voice, "quickly. I can't transform without my tail."

Gohan looked at the kid, saw him try to reach on his own for his tail, rip it off, despite the spasms that were violently contracting his muscles. He stopped him.

"Just as a last resort," he said. "I have a better idea."
"Please," pleaded Goku, "there's no time-"

"Well, we need to find us some time then. Leave it to grandpa."

He patted the kid on the head and looked around. Took a breath in. He remembered this place, this island alright. Could even recall the scents, though now they were mixed to new ones, a lot of chemical stinks brought by Capsule Corporation's innovations to the place, mostly.

"Pack up! We're going to the Tournament's island."

The two pupils had been overjoyed to hear that. They had run into the house and back out again in record time, bringing out bundles and suitcases full of their stuff.

"Now, that might be a bit too much." said Muten. "You'll want to stay light for this trip."

"Why, master?" asked the young Gohan, weighing his own luggage, perplexed. "The ship doesn't allow us to carry even this much?"

And Muten, with the most natural tone of voice in the world and a genuinely surprised look had simply said, "Ship? What ship?"

"There should be an island in that direction." said Gohan, finally, pointing somewhere to the north east. "Five kilometres. Gotta hand it to the old man, if he hadn't made me swim here I'd never have known. And, hop!"

He grabbed Goku. The boy didn't say anything - the transformation was advancing to the next stage, and fur had begun to cover his body.

"Better if no one sees that."

With a powerful swing, Gohan tossed Goku into the air, like a bullet, in the north-east direction. Then, he flexed on his legs.

A gunshot echoed through the stadium. Someone screamed.

The old man shook his head. Whatever was happening, not much he could do, right now. He had a bigger responsibility to take care of. There should be enough capable fighters around to handle it anyway.

He crouched one last time, then with one powerful push of his legs he jumped, right on the same trajectory as Goku, and like him, he disappeared into the distance.

Chapter End Notes

Chapter over! Sorry for the long delay, again. This end of arc has been a bit of a drag to me, growing way beyond my original intentions (just to give an idea, this is the first of THREE chapters that I originally designed as one, and the next one's something like 13,000 words long). It didn't help that I felt a lot of doubts and second thoughts about the specific details of what happened, because it lays the foundations for the next arc and I really didn't want to screw it up. Thanks a lot for the reviews, as usual!
A Red Ribbon base in the northern hemisphere

Colonel Green sat idly in the meeting room, browsing through a few printed pages. His long, clawed finger would follow the words, occasionally stop below one, to then skip ahead, creasing slightly the paper every time he turned a page. The report had been sent to him by his agent on the field just a few minutes before. He did not expect there would be much of use in it, but he was not in the habit of disregarding potentially useful information. Also, it was a good way to distract himself from the tension of waiting for the outcome of the mission. So much hung in the balance there, both for him and for the cause he had dedicated his life to. Being slightly tense was certainly warranted. In front of him, left on the desk, were a tablet, airing the images of the Tournament currently unfolding with a muted audio, and a small pager, with a keyboard and a green LED light that blinked at regular intervals.

The door slammed open, and in walked another ptero like him, a corpulent, younger one, wearing an officer's uniform and grades. He put himself on attention and beat his chest with his fist. "He is our Maestro." he said.

The other raised his eyes from the document. "And we are his Instruments." he replied. "Are we talking openly then, Cymbal?"

"There is no need for subterfuge any more, Piano." grunted the younger officer. "We have just received news that Violin has failed. Giran still lives and is now in the Tournament's infirmary. He will probably be guarded. Once he wakes up, and spills the beans, we're done for."

Piano eyed his pager. The light was still green; the device, silent.

"Curious." his beak curled in displeasure. "You say there is no need subterfuge any more, and yet you come bearing news I should have received directly. What is going on, exactly?"

More officers and simple soldiers came into the room. Another ptero, but mostly humans, and they freely sat around the table, after doing the ritual salute. Cymbal gestured at them all.

"We've decided your performance has been disappointing, Piano. Especially with this new toy of yours-"

"Violin."
"You've been soft. She'd failed already, and now she's failed again. It was a good thing we overrode her signal feed and took it into our hands."

There were some snickers around. Piano looked at Tambourine, the only other ptero, the second oldest of them, and saw him smiling innocently. It was apparent they had all turned on him. Well, such was the nature of their organisation. The world to the strong.

"So what did you order her to do now?" he asked, slowly.

"To assassinate the Commander." said Cymbal. "And then give the signal to begin the Concerto."

Piano laughed out loud. Around the room, not many seemed to find the notion nearly as funny.

"I'm sorry," he said finally, "I believe you're serious. So it wasn't humour, it was insanity. We still have four months to go before the Dragon Balls go back to being active. Why wouldn't we use every second of them to our advantage?"

Cymbal slammed his hand on the table. "Because if Giran talks, we lose the advantage of surprise! And that's worth way more than a few more soldiers brought to our cause."

"Then kill Giran. Violin can try again, if she's still alive. Or you can send some of your men. I know you've hidden a few among the escort. How many? Five? Six?"

"Actually, it's fifty." intervened Tambourine. "I took the precaution of infiltrating a few more as simple spectators. Commander Red and his lapdog have no idea, of course."

"How thoughtful of you." said Piano. "One might think you almost hoped that Violin would fail, just so you could pull off this little power play."

"We take out the Commander. We take the stadium." Cymbal explained. "At the same time, we strike in all the Ribbon bases, all at once. We're all ready to spring into action as soon as the signal comes - we've prepared for this moment for years. Out of eight main bases, we have the majority in four, this one being the safest. Two are contended, included HQ, and two are loyalist. Good enough odds, if you ask me."

The old ptero chuckled. "And one wonders why I never asked you. Have you seen that Tournament, Cymbal? Not very secret intelligence, the fights are on TV. That woman, Bulma, has most of those fighters dancing in the palm of her hand. If they're there to defend the place, do you think five men, or fifty, stand a chance? Subterfuge is the only hope we have, at this stage. Then we must strike quickly. If we do it now, they'll have time to prepare, and we'll never get the Dragon Balls, mark my words. We need a way to blindside them."

"Lots of words come out of your mouth," growled Cymbal, leaning in forward towards the officer, "yet all I hear is, I'm a coward."

For a long moment of tension no one spoke. The silence was as weighty as the insult that had preceded. Many hands were laid on guns, fingers ready to close around the handle and draw.

Then Piano chuckled and made a shrug. The rest of the bystanders relaxed as the tension was defused. "Fine, have it your way." he said. "Just don't come crying to me when things go south."

Cymbal spat on the ground, spiteful. "They won't."

"So I hope. Now, when is this genius plan of yours supposed to begin?"
"We're not idiots, Piano." said Tambourine, with a snicker. "It's begun right before we entered this room."

The old ptero didn't show any emotion from those words, but he checked quickly the tablet. The transmission had been interrupted; the stream of the fights had been replaced by an error message apologising for 'technical difficulties'. "Of course it did. So, given that Violin must have done her part now, would you let her leave the stadium now?"

"What, you still try to protect her?" laughed Cymbal. "That's beyond pathetic."

"She did her job, right?"

Tambourine raised a brow. "Commander Red appears dead, yes. But she can still be of use."

"She has a Dragon Ball." insisted Piano, irritated. "An inert one, for now, but that will change come September. Would you rather that fall in the enemy's hands now if the attack fails? If that happens, they could put it out of our reach, and it may as well be lost forever to us. Conversely, if we have it, we can force a confrontation with the enemy and stall them. Recovering it should be our number one priority."

"The attack won't fail. My men will take care of that."

"Then one less, incompetent soldier surely won't make the difference, right?"

Piano didn't flinch, even in the face of the obvious hostility of the others. This was all it was about. Never showing any weakness. He could not back down, or these idiots wouldn't just take his order feed from him.

"Fine." grunted Cymbal, finally. "Have it your way. Who cares. Look, I'll even give you back control of her feed, you can tell her to turn tail if that's what you want. What's done is done anyway."

"How kind of you. Now, if you'll excuse me."

Piano grabbed the pager and walked to the door. He had put his claws on the handle when he stopped himself.

From outside the room, a chaotic mix of sounds could be heard. There were screams of anger and fear, broken occasionally by the rhythmic cadence of an automatic rifle firing in bursts. The few loyalists in the base were being rounded up and dealt with. This was it, then, truly. No going back.

He drew his own side arm, pushed the door open, walked out.

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_The Tenkaichi Tournament_

"What is happening to that boy?"

"I don't know, but if I were in you, I'd start worrying about paying up."

"Screw that, I will not count my money until it's over and done."

For all his bluster, Captain Teal knew all too well his subordinate was probably right on this one. This escort task seemed like a nice day out and a chance to have fun a bit, but perhaps going as far as betting half of his pay on the final match meant he'd let himself be carried away by the atmosphere.
Still, this was really a bit of bad luck. The boy seemed to have just started faring better against that old fart, then there had been all that emotional nonsense with hugging and crying, and now suddenly he goes and does... whatever the heck it was that he was doing now. Wait, was that fur growing on his arm?

"Maybe they'll call the match off and have a redo," suggested Teal, tentatively. "He seems unwell."

Lieutenant Gray smirked. "Yeah, dream on." he said. "Unless someone dies, they won't interfere until the match is decided. That's just how these monks are."

He was right enough, and Teal knew it already. Still, the captain found his demeanour slightly annoying. Maybe it was the arrogance, that the lieutenant wouldn't usually display - he was one rank below him, after all. But this was a covert mission, and they were supposed to act and talk like civilians, lest someone notice. He sure did seem to revel in it. Most of all, perhaps, was that smirk of his. Teethy and wolfish, it always felt like it was mocking him for not knowing something. Like he felt better, and that ticked Teal off. But he couldn't much make use of his authority when they were in service to have some redress - that would have been unprofessional. And other than those vibes, Gray had never given him any reason to worry or complain. He was as exemplary an officer as they come.

There was a loud bang. Teal's hand immediately ran to his holster, all thoughts of gambling forgotten.

"What is going on?" he shouted, pressing his earpiece to be sure to catch properly any orders that would come through. "Have you seen where the shot came from? Do we have a sniper?"

Gray didn't answer; he seemed to be intently listening to his earpiece too. Strange, because to Teal, no orders were coming through. Then he lost sight of him for a moment, and next thing he knew, he turned around to see him holding his pistol to his own level, still the same self satisfied smirk on his face, as if this was the same as when he was gloating about winning a bet.

"Pity," he said, "seems like I won't get to collect that win."

He shot twice. Captain Teal slid back on his chair, a trail of blood on the backrest behind him, his fingers having just managed to grip his own gun's handle. His consciousness faded while he was still wondering what the hell had just happened.

The only answer he could see was that fucking smirk.

"DOWN!"

Staff Officer Black ducked under the chairs in front of him, and with a violent pull he wrenched Bulma down with him. The other boy, Yamcha, seemed about to protest, when another series of gunshots echoed from all directions.

"Idiot, stay down! " hissed Black. Then he pulled a little wire from his jacket's collar and asked for a report from his men. No answer came. He swore.

"Are they shooting at us again?" asked Bulma, panicked. " Why are they shooting at us?"

The man shook his head. "First one was a rifle. These were small arms. There's more than one shooter." he said. "Let me check on the Commander."

He moved a bit to the side to reach Red's seat, but as he suspected, there was not much to check. He
was slumped over the chair, head dangling on one side, his bloody shirt so sticky and wet it now adhered to his chest, revealing the shape of the body holster underneath he kept his weapon hidden in. His arm was limp, and he had no pulse. Enough blood had pumped out of his wound that there must be more outside than inside his body by this point. The bullet had gone straight into his heart.

"Is he..." asked Bulma.

"Dead, yes. Probably as soon as he was hit."

The girl shuddered. "I'm sorry for, uh, your loss."

Black considered the answer for a moment. "Our line of work has its dangers." he said dryly.

The world exploded. The screams of terror, the people running about, the gunshots, all got lost in a shockwave that rattled Bulma to her bones and smashed her to the ground. When she rose up, she saw blood trickling down her face and onto her hands. Next to her was the body of Brother Wei, tossed to the ground by the same shock. Instinctively, she retracted her hand with a shriek, then extended it again to check if he was still breathing. Luckily, he wasn't dead, just out of it.

"Stun grenades!" shouted Black. "Keep under cover, or you'll just risk to be hurt more if another one goes off."

Bulma nodded, still almost without breath. Concrete dust caked her hands and face, and burned in her eyes. Around, it was all shrieks, shouts, gunshots. There was another explosion, more distant. She thought she needed to do something, get someone to help. She realised her phone was still in her hand, but when she checked it out, her heart sank. The fall and impact had shattered the screen. She tried pushing the on button, to no effect. The thing was dead. She tossed it to the groud, frustrated.

Another rifle shot reverberated through the stadium. Yamcha's body was tossed violently down on the pavement.

Black shook his head. "I had told him to stay down."

"Ouch! I didn't think it would hurt that much!"

The officer felt like pynching himself to check whether he was awake when he saw Yamcha, the boy who had just been hit by a sniper rifle, open his eyes, crack his neck, then look worried at his shoulder, where a bullet was only partially stuck into his flesh.

"Oh, shit, I'm bleeding!" he screamed.

Bulma managed a faint smile. "Welcome to the club." she said. "What's the situation with Goku?"

"Right, Goku." Yamcha yanked the bullet out, wincing a moment with pain. He was heaving a bit, but otherwise he seemed fine. "He's not there any more. The ring is empty."

"Yes!" the girl chuckled. "Goku's grandpa, I love you!"

"I am glad that solves that problem, whatever it was." said Black. "That only leaves a sniper, an unknown number of active shooters on the loose, and a mass panic to deal with."

"Mass panic?" asked Bulma.

Black simply gestured all around. The area had grown almost quiet, as most of the people had left. The screaming had become more distant, as people from all over the place had started running for the
"They'll try to flee," he explained. "Everyone at once, without criterion. Panicking humans are scary creatures. There will be a stampede. People will die."

Bulma's face paled. "Oh, no. We can't allow that."

"Then I hope you put preventative measures in place when building this stadium," replied Black. "Now it's too late. Besides, they caused this on purpose. This is just a distraction, to keep us occupied while they pursue their real objective."

He raised his gun.

"Which is why we shouldn't let them."

"But I can't...! I am responsible for these people!" shouted back the girl. "Yamcha, go find Bandages and Spike, quickly. Help the people. See what you can do."

Yamcha hesitated. "Bulma, are you sure? You'd be left alone in the middle of this firefight. I can-"

"You would send away the bulletproof boy?" Black growled. "Are you a fool? He's our best hope."

"And until further notice, he works for me, not you."

"Yes, Yamcha. This is more urgent. Go. We'll be fine, somehow. There's still Muten, Krillin and the Ox King. If you see them, send them to join us, and we'll be safe."

The boy nodded, uncertain, then jumped away.

Black sent a sideway glance to Bulma. "If you'll be my only help in this, you may as well make yourself useful. Have you ever fired a gun?"

Bulma nodded. The man raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"Go get Commander Red's then. He doesn't need it any more. Avoid leaving cover at all costs. I'll wait."

Bulma nodded again, and she crawled up to Commander Red's seat. She could well see where the gun was, and what she had to do to get it. Slowly, she sent her hand up, looking for the opening of Red's shirt, unbuttoning it. Then she slid her hand inside, between flesh that was getting cooler than it ought to be and fabric sticky with blood. She bit her lip, trying to resist the instinct to retch. This, she realised, was a test Black was putting her up to. If she couldn't resist doing something like this, what use could she be in battle?

But she had sent away Yamcha, and now it was only her. It was her responsibility, her decision. She better live up to it.

Her fingers found the gun, gripped the handle, slid it out. She ran quickly away, back to Black, who looked at her a bit more approvingly now.

"Good. Do you have any experience of life or death fights?"

She didn't give much of a thought to that question. "Yes," she replied. "Don't look down on me just because I'm young."

"And a supposedly rich pampered heiress." added Black. "But I'm surprised. Perhaps you may indeed be of some use. What do you think their objectives will be?"
"Killing Giran." she said. "I don't know what's going on exactly, and clearly you don't either. But that was what Mai tried doing, and failed. That's why they're causing this whole mess."

"Yes, miss Bulma, I agree. But obviously, that may not be the whole story." replied the officer. "They are traitors to the Ribbon. They killed our Commander. And whoever they are, I am not privy to their motivations, which makes me their enemy. So I can guess a good secondary objective will be to kill me too."

He signed her to move towards the right. Silently, they walked among seats, always keeping their head low. Bulma's heart was beating loudly in her throat. Then he signed her to stop.

"They're all around us." he whispered. "Five of them, if I heard right. And they're closing in. Since we're going to have to fight our own way out, miss Bulma, let me ask you just one more question. Have you ever killed a man?"

Someone vaulted over a chair right behind him. It took an instant for her to process the image - a man wearing regular clothes, looking normal in all ways, and pointing a gun at her...

Bulma's senses were flooded with adrenaline, and she felt like she could grasp it now, even if just a fraction of it, the feeling she'd experienced at the end of her battle with Puar. The clarity, the sharp perception. She could see the barrel, the flash, the direction of the shot. She could react. She shifted slightly to the right, lifted her hands, squeezed the trigger.

Bang.

It was a moment that felt like it hadn't even been her own; as if an external force had moved her body. Then it ended, and she was holding a smoking gun in her hand, and a few seats away, a body was tumbling down like a ragdoll. Her arms were shaking. She slowly lowered them.

"I believe that answers the question." mumbled Black. "Let's go."

"What happened? Huh? What happened?"

Pilaf looked around panicked, as if the walls of the room could possibly hold the answer. There had been a few sharp noises that sounded suspiciously like gunshots, so even he could figure out that unless the final battle had involved some serious cheating, something was off. The monks around him didn't seem to have many answers, though. The old witch was sitting in her own corner, looking into her crystal ball, gesturing mysteriously with her fingers and mumbling to herself. All very witch-like stuff, but even if she saw any news of import with her clairvoyance, she didn't seem much willing to share.

Now someone arrived at the door and mumbled into the ear of a monk. Suddenly there was a lot more mumbling and activity, but no significant increase in the sharing news part.

"Excuse me!" said Pilaf, tugging at the robe of one of the monks and trying to make himself sound as imperious as he could. "I demand some explanation. We were not placed here just to sit through... whatever is happening without knowing anything!"

The monk stared at him with the eyes of someone who thought he had been placed there exactly for that reason. "There is some trouble, mister Pilaf," he said in the end, "but please don't move from here. This way we can protect you best."

"Protect us? Those were guns I heard! What are you going to do if they come here to shoot us, kung fu the bullets back at them?"
"Please stay put." sighed the monk, and ran to his companions.

Pilaf went back to sit where he'd been until then, fuming. As a king, albeit one not officially recognised by any authority, or people, or anyone except for his closest associates really, going through such indignity felt outrageous, and certainly not the sort of thing he ought to deal with. He wished his good friend and future father-in-law, the Ox King, were there to defend his point of view more vigorously, but sadly, he was somewhere else, enlisted from that damnable woman into looking for that other even more damnable woman. Really, his life was a stream of indignities that he had to swim through at this point.

It was then that he noticed something different.

When he felt his robe tugged again, the monk turned around having lost his usual enlightened calm. "I said you are to stay put in this room, mister Pilaf!"

"I know you said that!" he shrieked back. "But then, why did the witch get to leave instead?"

The first thing Giran felt upon waking up was the distant echo of multiple gunshots, followed by a couple explosions. The second was the searing pain in his belly, where he'd been shot and was now all stitched up. Still, he pushed himself up, because as much as doing that sucked, he thought dying would suck much more.

"What's going on?," he asked, his voice still slurred due to the fading anaesthesia.

The doctor and nurse turned around suddenly, hearing him, and immediately rushed to him. One held a syringe with a thick needle full of a yellow liquid. Tranquiliser, probably. Even in his hazy state, it wasn't much work for Giran to just slap it out of his fingers, eliciting a quick yelp of pain.

"This isn't the time for me to go back to sleep," he growled. "Answer me."

"There seems to have been an attack." mumbled the doctor. The nurse was still massaging his hand and looking dejectedly at the smashed syringe and its contents that had poured out on the floor.

"Is that so? I wonder who is doing the attacking." said the ptero.

"Well, we still don't know. If I had to take a guess-"

"That was a rhetorical question, doctor. Now help me off this damned bed."

The man hesitated. "No," he answered, finally, mustering a bit of determination in front of the blue giant that was towering above him even while sitting. "You are wounded, and you are to stay still until you recover-EEEEP!"

Without asking a second time, Giran had simply clutched the doctor's shoulder and pushed against it to rise. He winced in pain, then hobbled towards the door.

"This is crazy!" said the doctor, whose face in turn showed his spine hadn't taken too graciously to being used as a crutch by a wounded pterosaur three times his size. "You are in no condition to fight!"

"I know. I don't intend to." replied Giran. Then, pointing at the nurse, "Now, you! Move that bed."

The man blinked. "Excuse me?"

"I said move it! Toss it against the door. You too, doctor. Push all the heaviest stuff you can find.
Don't slack off, if you want to live."

Completely terrified by this point, the doctor simply nodded and scuttled away, immediately grabbing and starting to roll an oxygen tank.

"No, not that! That's pressurised, it can blow up. Pick something inert. Yeah, that machine is good. Put it there. You, toss the bed on the side, push it against the door, like a shield. Like that. Now add some random crap, I don't care what it is, just give it more mass."

Following his instructions, the two scared men ended up piling an incoherent bunch of surgical tools, blankets, vials and furniture from the infirmary room. Bed aside, the whole thing didn't look as much as a barricade rather than a mound of trash ready to be carried to the dumpster.

"All right, now make room, move aside..."

Giran walked in front of the improvised defense and took a deep breath. He then made a disgusting retching sound and spat a mucus-like substance out of his mouth. The purple, sticky goo splattered all over the barricade, merging it all with its rubbery consistence into a single... something. Something that didn't look pretty but that could probably absorb a fair amount of blows before coming apart.

"Merry-Go-Round Gum!" announced the ptero, triumphantly, still panting for the effort.

"That's not some kind of special move!" protested the doctor, indignant. "That's expectorating!"

"Mom! Dad!"

It had been such a fun day. They'd gone to sleep in a hotel - Takao loved that, it was the first time he had been in one. Then the morning they had come here, to watch the fighters. And they were all insanely cool. Takao felt like he was watching one of his favourite shows, the ones where the heroes would punch the bad guys until they exploded, except here, it was all real. It had been a great day, perhaps the happiest, most exciting one of his (still rather short) life.

Then the chaos had started, and it had turned into a nightmare.

Takao was not wounded, just scared, and stunned, and partially deafened by the explosions. His mom had grabbed his hand and had started pulling him towards the exit, but then the crowd around them had grown wilder, had pressed more, and in the tide of warm, scared humans he had felt that hand slip from his, pulled away. He had shouted, mom had shouted too, but so had thousands of other people, all the time.

"Mom! Dad!"

He couldn't see them, or hear them, or touch them. It was all people around him, all so much taller than him, all pushing and pulling and not even looking down, not even noticing he was there. Someone shoved him to the side, and Takao's already weak knees gave in. He fell to the ground. Someone stomped on his leg. He shouted in pain, but then again, so did everyone else.

He thought he just realised what that word he heard so often meant, the one adults would often say with a sad look on their faces. Die.

Maybe to die meant to be like this, alone and in pain and scared, forever.

"Hey kid! Up here!"
He looked up. He didn't see his mom or dad, no, but there were hands reaching for him. Strong arms lifted him up. And one moment later, he was piggybacking on someone he couldn't possibly believe.

"Yamcha?" he shouted. "You're the hero of West City!"

"That's not fair." grumbled a massive man next to him, all wrapped in bandages. "How come you get kids recognising you, but no one recognises us?"

"Because I'm handsome and you look like horror movie extras," replied Yamcha. "What do you think of the situation? Any ideas?" Bandages scoffed. "Not good. They're all panicking and pushing. Someone's bound to really get hurt at this pace. The exit would be large enough if only they weren't running, but these gunners are whipping them into a frenzy on purpose. Took a couple down on my way here, by the way."

He nodded in the direction of a long linen strip he had hung from a nearby pylon. Two men, bound and gagged, were dangling helplessly from it, struggling to get free.

Yamcha shook his head. "That's good, but it won't be enough to just stop a pair. The people won't even realise what's going on!"

"The tide is indeed out of control," said Spike, who had been perched up on a nearby wall as a lookout. "You can not stop the sea from crashing on the rocks; so you should rather break them yourself."

The other two looked at him puzzled.

"I mean, if we widen the entrance," he explained, "the crowd would leave more easily."

"Smashing things. Good plan, I like it." said Bandages. "I can use fabric to reinforce the walls too so we don't have to worry about the whole thing crashing on our heads."

"It just has to last long enough for everyone to go through anyway." Yamcha lifted the child he had been holding until then and put him sitting on the wall, right next to where Spike was. "Now, you stay sitting here and don't move, okay? We have to help everyone, then we can go find mum and dad."

Takao nodded silently. Then he very intently started to suck on his thumb.

"Let's go!"

Yamcha, Bandages and Spike jumped in different directions. From his vantage point, the child could now see the stadium, and the people moving around it, creating an intricate shadow theatre in the mixed light of the twilight, the full moon, and the floodlights that were turning on one by one. Alone, Takao waited for his mom and dad to come get him.

Despite her first lucky shot, Bulma had not it in her to do much more than defend herself. Crouched on the ground, her back to one of the seats, she mostly kept rethinking about that moment, and about the one time she'd been on the other side of a bullet, and feeling a shiver every time. Black realised what was going on all too well - he'd seen it happen to fully trained, adult soldiers their first time on a battlefield. But it was fine, after all. It would have been shameful if the second in command of the whole Red Ribbon army needed the help of a novice girl to take down a few small fries.

These traitors had really underestimated him if they thought these guys could kill him. Five of them, perhaps; but now one was dead thanks to Bulma, and another had moved too soon and he'd
managed to get him himself. That left three, approaching from different directions.

"Stay here." whispered Black to the girl next to him. "And be prepared to defend yourself."

The girl nodded, her eyes retrieved a bit of focus, and her grip on the gun seemed to get surer. She was reacting better than most soldiers did, thought Black. She would have probably been a natural, had she gotten a bit of proper training.

He took off his jacket, bundled it and left it on a seat next to her, pushing down the spring mechanism that usually kept the empty seat up. Then he started slowly walking away, as silently as possible. He needed to be careful, alerting the enemy that he was changing position would make the entire exercise moot. Slowly...

There was a sudden clang as one of the seats' spring mechanism went up. The three terrorists immediately turned their eyes to the direction of the noise, guns stretched.

_Gotcha_ , thought Black, with a smile.

The gunmen found themselves puzzled as from the seat they were pointing at a white jacket sprung up. A few seats ahead, their target rose from cover, knowing already where to aim.

_Bang._

One was down. The other two realised what was going on and turned immediately to react.

_Bang._

The second fell, discharging his weapon into the air. The third was ready to fire now. Black considered for a fraction of a second whether the risk was worth it, or if he should go back to cover-

_Bang._

From next to the jacket's seat Bulma had rose up, and she'd taken the man by surprise. Her bullet had lodged itself in his side, and the wound was bleeding, but he was not falling.

"You bitch, I'm gonna-" he shouted, as he turned around to fire on her.

_Bang._

Black's third shot was efficient and precise. The enemy fell down, instantly killed after the bullet pierced his skull.

He ran back to the girl, who was still trembling slightly, this time in simple fear for her life. "That was close." said the man, lowering her gun with a gesture.

"I didn't want to kill him." she explained. "I tried to aim towards the side, I was hoping I could wound him without-"

The other shook his head. "That's not going to fly. Miss Bulma, this is a battlefield. Guns can always kill, but most importantly, people can take horrific wounds and still react. He would have died bleeding from that shot too, you know. He just would have taken you down with him."

"Well, this would be just a day's work for someone like you, right?" Bulma flashed him an angry stare. "Sorry if I'm not as cool headed about _killing people._"

"Someone like me, Miss Bulma? Do you mean a fighter? A soldier? A mercenary?" Black didn't
flinch, looking straight back at her. "I'm afraid you got yourself a bit too deep into trouble to get to make that distinction. You have quite the menagerie following you to be squeamish about violence now. We don't all have bulletproof skin like your friend."

"Well, maybe if you're strong enough, you don't have to kill anyone." she mumbled.

"Said everyone who ever started an arms race. I will be happy to discuss the moral philosophy of war with you over a nice coffee when this is all over, Miss Bulma. At the moment, however, I believe it is paramount to make sure that we're both alive to get to drink it. Please focus on that."

Bulma nodded. "Right. I'm sorry." she said. There was a deep exhaustion in her voice. "This is not the moment, and you did just save my life. And at least now we know we've both been blindsided by a common enemy. It's just that this is all... very sudden."

The man smiled bitterly. "You tell me. Believe me, I know this must be hard for you. I'd like to say it doesn't get any easier, but the truth is, it does. Take that as you want."

She shuddered. She'd held a gun many times by then, but still, none had felt as heavy as the one in her hand right now.

"So, what do we do?"

"What else? We plan, and we live another day. Here, help me out."

Black grabbed back the jacket he'd used as a decoy, dove into its pocket and drew out a folded sheet of paper. It turned out to be an aerial photography of the stadium, taken right after it had been built, displaying clearly the layout of the entire structure.

"We're here," he said, pointing at the middle section of the spectators' stands, "and I believe these guys were the only enemies that had remained in the area. Most people fled towards the two side entrances, here and here, and the gunners made sure to make a lot of noise in the central area so they'd drive them towards those. However a good number of people found their way blocked and ended up being pushed towards the ring."

"There's the barriers, though." observed Bulma.

The man shook his head. "I only caught a glimpse, earlier. But they've clearly been smashed. The crowd pushed them down and shattered them, and then must have poured onto the ring and in the building behind it. It'd be a shorter way for those in the front rows than reaching for any of the exits."

"But Giran's in there. Do you think-"

"I'm sure it was on purpose. A few more of the shooters probably mixed up with the crowd and went that way too. They'll sneak in and attack when they have the best chance of succeeding."

"So we must go then!"

"But we can't. The sniper that killed Red might still be watching these stands. And if we don't want to risk our head being blown off, we'd better not show it too much. Obviously, if you hadn't sent away the bullet-proof boy..."

"I was not about to let these people die without helping as much and as quickly as possible." retorted Bulma. "And that is that."

"Then I have nothing." concluded Black. "We might as well hide here and wait for all this to be
Silence fell between them. Bulma knew that couldn't be it, but when she considered peering out of cover, walking down, risking exposing herself, an icy fear clutched her. She just couldn't do it, but couldn't ask someone else to do it either. Yet this couldn't last long. By her inaction, she was allowing Giran to be killed, and whatever nefarious plan had been set in motion to succeed. Every second that passed was one less second to turn around the battle.

There was a booming sound. Not only in the air; the structure itself of the stands under her vibrated powerfully.

"What is going on?" asked Black.

Again the sound, rhythmically, propagated towards them from some indefinite point below, resonating down to their bones. Like a giant's hammer hitting the anvil.

"I think I might know." said Bulma, allowing herself a smile.

"Out of my way, ya scum!" roared a familiar voice, just below. There was an acute scream, and another armed man flew over their heads, tossed like he weighted nothing, landing with a crash among the chairs three rows above.

With heavy, rumbling steps, the Ox King made his way to where Bulma and Black were hiding, offering his back to the ring. His massive body made a better shield against any sniper than the poor cover offered by seats made of plastic and fake leather ever could.

"Ya okay, miss Bulma?" he asked, bending over.

"We're fine." replied Black for both of them.

"I wasn't asking ya Red Ribbon scum!" roared the giant back. "I oughta send you flying with the others lackeys of yours."

"It's alright, mister... huh... Ox." intervened Bulma, getting on her feet. "I know that you don't like him, but right now, these guys have betrayed him too. We've got a common enemy to worry about. Glad that you got to join us."

"I was standing guard near like you asked me," explained the King, "Then all that mess happened. I saw Yamcha and the others jumping around like crazy, asked if he needed anything, but he told me they were enough, to come help ya instead. That Mai had shot someone. Where's that wench?"

He turned his head around, looking in every direction, under the chairs even, as if she could just be hiding anywhere.

Bulma shook her head. "Not here, I'm afraid. But we're going to get her. First thing, let's get down to the ring."

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*Piano to Violin. Disengage all targets and stop providing cover to the remaining forces. Recovery of spent Dragon Ball is absolute priority. Abandon your current nest, adopt a civilian disguise and find a way to leave the theatre of operations as fast as possible.*

The human tide that had poured down the stands and then onto the ring, pushing and crushing under its feet the transparent protective barriers that had been put before it, wasn't as big as the two that had
moved towards the side entrances, but it was big enough. Clarinet had no need to give orders to his men there - anyone who had a chance to mix with it had done so, and now they all were in the antechamber of the main building, the same space where fighters would wait before their encounters. He'd managed to get through thanks to no one noticing when he had shot Captain Teal, his companion on the Red Ribbon side of his mission. The chaos had been too much for his quick actions to stand out, and he had not joined the small teams designated to raising panic or trying to finish off Staff Officer Black. Here was the biggest, most important objective of the mission, and he needed to be right at the centre of this effort.

He signalled his men, one by one, and they progressively, casually gathered in a certain part of the room, chatting in pairs like they were regular civilians. A quick glance revealed that it'd be hard to go any further while keeping the pretense. The monks that ran the place had organised themselves very quickly when the chaos had started, and now they guarded all entrances to corridors that departed from that hall. The only free way was out, back on the ring, and that wasn't much use.

There was not much mystery on which door led to the infirmary - there were very helpful signs on the wall for that sort of thing. The door wasn't especially well guarded either. The question, pondered Clarinet, was the distance. How much time would it take to get there? This was a matter of seconds - whether they would be able to kill Giran before the rest of the monks were on them. They had assault rifles in capsules, but without showing their hand, all they could do for a first surprise attack was use the small arms they'd managed to conceal under their clothes. And the guards currently in front of that corridor were enough to slow them down critically - if only with their corpses, once they'd shot them.

"What do we do?" asked one of his men, walking up to him as if by chance.

Clarinet thought about it for a moment. He considered the rest of the people in the room. Twenty or so men of the Instruments, disguised as civilians. Another hundred actual civilians, at most, of all sexes and ages. He'd counted twelve of the monks, three pairs of which were stationed in front of the same number of doors. And two of the participants. The old man, the one who'd inexplicably worn a wig when fighting while now displayed his bald head without shame, but it was pretty obvious it was the same person, and the other kid, the one who had not started roaring in the middle of the ring and then had been tossed away by his opponent. Jackie Chun and Krillin, if his memory didn't serve him wrong. The old guy was chatting with one of the monks, clearly worried, while the kid followed him like a puppy on a leash.

Clarinet decided.

"We use plan #54." he replied. "You do it, Oboe."

The other hesitated for a moment, before asking: "On who?"

"The bald kid."

With a silent nod, the other acknowledged the order and paced away, as casually as he'd come close in the first place. Clarinet begun gathering the others, and quietly signalling what was going to happen. The strategy, really, was quite simple. Shoot someone, create a decoy, then as everyone is distracted by that, the rest gets to break through before everyone realises what's happened. And all at the mere cost of a single man of theirs who would inevitably get captured or taken down. For the purpose of such a plan, a child would be the best possible target. More people would run to his help, and given that it was a contestant, it would also remove a potentially dangerous variable from the equation.

The designated shooter was in position. Clarinet readied to bolt down the corridor as soon as he
heard the shot. And then...

**BANG!**

There was a moment of panic, a moment of confusion, but *not enough*. The monks were about to jolt, but remained in their place. When Clarinet turned around to see what had happened, he saw Oboe with a gaping open mouth, his smoking gun in hand; the bald kid sitting on the ground, unharmed if taken a bit aback; and the old man with one arm stretched, and *a bullet caught between index and thumb of his left hand*.

"That," said the old man, calmly, "was a mistake."

The shooter scrambled to fire again, but was instantly swarmed by three monks who grabbed him and disarmed him. Clarinet saw them walking towards him too, and remained for way too long a fraction of a second wondering stupidly why that was before realising that both him and his men had drawn their guns as soon as they'd heard the shot.

"FUCK!" he shouted, pointing the gun at the oncoming monks and firing. "Let's get out of here!"

The old man jumped forward. Or rather, "jumped" didn't really do justice to what he did. He disappeared and reappeared instantly a few metres ahead; what his motions in between had been was just speculation. Each and every bullet Clarinet fired ended up grabbed by him.

There was a burst of air behind him. A few of the others had pulled out their capsules and grabbed their assault rifles. The fire came in fast and from multiple directions this time, but the old master still wouldn't yield. What he couldn't grab he dodged, and what he couldn't dodge, because it would end up hitting someone behind him, he at least deflected, with some casual flick of his wrist or even just a raised leg, so that it went to jam itself inoffensively into the wood planks of the surrounding walls. And the bald kid behind him had gotten up too. After a moment of stupor, he had acquired a determined grimace, and was slowly walking towards them. If his ability was anything close to the old man's...

"Retreat!" barked Clarinet, turning around. "Let's push through *right now!*"

The firing was redirected towards the entrance to the infirmary. One of the monks posted to guard it dodged out of the way, but the other, taken by surprise, was hit across his chest and fell down, a line of bloody spots cutting the front of his robe in two like the stroke of a calligrapher's brush. His body was immediately trampled by the first of the Instruments who ran towards the corridor.

Yet the old man was closer now. Clarinet had run amidst the bunch of his own men, and two behind him had already fallen to surgically precise hand chops to their necks. There was no hope of beating him. There was only one thing that would get him away from his current objective - a more pressing one.

Clarinet turned around. "Oboe!" he shouted, angry. "You fucking weakling - make yourself *useful!*"

The man was restrained by three enemies, tossed on the ground, his arms held behind his back, disarmed. The order made him flinch, but it was just an instant. "He is our Maestro," he said finally, "and we are but his Instruments."

There are few uses for capsules smaller than the standard issue Capsule Corporation size of around three centimetres of length. This is because, due to a quirk of the fundamental physical laws they rely on, for smaller capsules the size and mass that can be contained within decrease dramatically. A capsule of half a centimetre can barely contain an object fifty times its size; and one smaller than one
millimetre would not be able to contain anything that wasn't smaller than itself, making it virtually useless. On the other hand, there are a number of nefarious uses conceivable for such small devices, which is why Capsule Corporation never sold any such models. Still, the science of capsules is a well known enough matter that a decent technologist with some good equipment and a few normal ones to reverse engineer could easily produce them anyway.

That is to say, it was well within the Red Ribbon's capabilities to produce the kind of capsule that Oboe squeezed open in that moment with a click of his jaw - as big as a single tooth, installed in place of one of his molars, and only able to contain a relatively small object, such as a live hand grenade. Which, upon encapsulation, had been frozen in time at the beginning of the count to its explosion.

One.

The puff of smoke and expansion of the capsule was accompanied by Oboe spitting blood and quite a few teeth. The monks who had been keeping him down realised what was going on and let him go, horrified, to seek refuge.

Two.

The man scrambled to his feet, finally free, and in a desperate run, he tossed himself towards Krillin, who remained too surprised and shocked to defend himself immediately, and was about to be grabbed...

Three.

Muten was a flash. He jumped back with a somersault and immediately landed behind Oboe, facing Krillin. His leg hit mercilessly upwards, without any of the care that he'd showed his other opponents. Oboe's bones were crushed under the impact, and he was dead even before the rest of his body, and the explosive he was carrying, could jam itself into the ceiling and explode there, causing a shower of wooden fragments and straw from the roof, mixed with a more gruesome kind of remains.

"M-master...," stuttered Krillin, trembling. "I'm sorry... I didn't..."

The old master shook his head and walked to him, to pat his shoulder.

"It's quite all right. You could not expect that. Only opponents whose thirst for blood far exceeds their talent would sink that low, and I didn't train you to fight that kind of people."

His eyes, lighting up with anger, flashed towards the exit where the monk lay dead. Sure enough, the rest of that pack of murderers had scuttered away, taking the chance that their companion had granted them with his own life.

Divination was a tricky business; and by no means anything as sure or all-powerful as most people would believe. Baba the Sybil, of course, knew better than to let any of this on to her customers. Her mystique was part of her brand. Still, having such powers was far from being useless. For example, faced with an uncertain situation, danger all around, and the risk of either being killed prematurely or being dragged into the drudgery of whatever enquiry would follow the incident, it gave her an excellent way to do a bunk in an efficient and relatively safe manner.

Leaving the room had been easy enough, because when her targets were so close, seeing through their intentions was trivial. And it's not like she needed to read anything complex. One head or eye movement, an instant of distraction, and there was always the opportunity to slip away unobserved.
Even a short glimpse of the future wasn't too hard, in those conditions. The future is, after all, just a relatively straightforward function of the past, give or take a few chaotic phenomena.

Now came the hard part, though, because the way out of the building was longer, and the dangers more real than just getting caught and brought back. At least that was her guess, judging from all the gunfire and explosions she could hear. She jumped down from her crystal ball and waved her hands a bit, using the sphere to focus her sight in a consistent manner. Visualising complex images became tiring if all she had to keep them in was her own head.

She could get a glimpse of what was in a short radius from her position, and it seemed safe enough. For a longer range view, however, her experience told her that the safest method was anchoring to someone else's senses. Deriving images just from environmental cues and seemingly random background noise got exponentially harder with distance. She could perceive a large mass of people in a direction right in front of her, so she tried seeing the scene from one of their eyes. There it was - a large room, crowded with people, but with visibility reduced by smoke and debris. There was some sort of panic, and her brother seemed at the centre of it all.

Baba scoffed. Typical of her brother, to just take a chance to show off and act cool. Not many situations outside of one where he could punch the lights out of people would afford him that. Next thing he'd try to milk that attention to hit on some random girl, if she knew him at all.

The scene wasn't very helpful, so she moved closer, to what she thought was one of the attackers, running from that very room. They were in a dense group, running like the devil himself was chasing them. The witch felt a tinge of amusement at the thought that it was her brother who was probable to follow them, so, not entirely inaccurate. Still, they were coming her way, and basically through the only straightforward way out she would have had.

She concentrated and probed other directions. In not one of them she could find a way to the outside that was completely unobstructed. If forced, she'd rather take the monks than the criminals, of course, but then again, she doubted their ability to keep her safe anyway. Her next best bet was someone who didn't belong to either faction, but that she could trust to stay silent, or better, enlist the help of. Someone who could act as her scout if necessary, or even just be taller and fitter than her, really, would be incredibly useful.

And there she was, an excellent candidate. Someone in a bathroom just a few metres away, a woman, and one she could reach without meeting any of the others - at least if she moved in the next 7.53 seconds, after which, all roads would be closed to her. There was not much time but to get a quick glance in her consciousness. Her self image seemed reassuring enough - a young woman, less than thirty, athletic, but tired and in pain. She was changing clothes, putting on an airy, colourful sarong. Her main current drive - to leave the Tournament grounds, as quick as possible. The perfect ally.

Baba would have prodded more, but as things were, her options were quickly shrinking, and she did not have the time. She jumped back on her crystal ball and floated away, silently, turning the corner just one instant before Clarinet and a group of his followers ran through the corridor.

Preceded by the Ox King's massive bulk, Bulma and Staff Officer Black walked into the antechamber of the main temple building. What lay before them was a half-devastated room. A crowd of people, most scared or huddled together in corners; a few monks hurrying around, some lending medical assistance, others tying up prisoners with ropes, one respectfully covering with a blanket what Bulma feared must be a corpse. A lot of debris and wreckage. Krilin, huddled to one side of his master, visibly shaken, while the old man kept a stoic, unreadable expression. And in the middle of the floor...
Bulma suddenly felt an impulse to retch.

"What has gone on here?" asked Black, walking forward with his usual commanding attitude.

"An attack," explained Muten. "By some fanatics who had mixed in with the crowd. They only made one victim, but not for lack of trying."

The man pressed on. "Where have they gone now? Quick!"

"Ya shut your mouth and show some respect to the master!" growled the Ox King, shoving Black aside with a push. "Yer not in charge here."

"It's all right." replied Muten. "They ran down that corridor. They were very interested in it, and we were just considering if we should pursue."

"We should." said Bulma, recovering from her initial shock. She still tried to divert her eyes from the ground right next to Muten. "We believe they're trying to kill Giran. Finish the job that Mai wasn't able to do."

"I thought as much." confirmed the master. "But if Giran is a warrior worth his salt, they won't have an easy time doing that, even if he's wounded. Still, I agree, we should hurry. I just hesitated leaving Krillin behind at the moment."

Hearing his name, the kid raised his head. "Behind?" his lips were slightly trembling, but pursed in a determined expression. "Master, I can come with you! I will help!"

Muten frowned. "Krillin, do not overestimate your abilities. A strong technique is nothing without a steady heart."

"We don't have time for this." said Black. "I'm going. Anyone who feels like helping, follow me."

"Let the kid come, master." chimed in the Ox King. "Ya can tell he's got the guts in him. Whatever happened here, he won't fall for it again."

"You can be... damn sure I won't!" exclaimed Krillin, jutting out his chest.

Muton took a moment to consider it. "Very well," he concluded, "just stay behind me at all times, and however dangerous you think this is - make it twice as much."

The kid gulped. Then all together, the group of three martial artists, one soldier, and one distressed but very stubborn girl ran in the corridor, on the trails of a squad of armed terrorists.

Clarinet cursed under his breath. It'd been a good day. It'd been a great day. A glorious, long awaited one. Hearing that the pretence would be over had thrilled him. Subterfuge was not something he was fond of - he'd rather be in the open, and shoot all the hypocrites that stood next to him in the Ribbon full of holes, like he'd done to Teal earlier. Stopping pretending had been what he'd always wanted, why he'd joined the Instruments. Today ought to be the best day of his life.

"Run! To the right!"

He wasn't afraid. He wasn't. Fucking. Afraid. Fear was just not a thing someone strong experienced. He'd trained the fear out of himself, through hundreds of battlefields. That was just adrenaline, that he felt, giving him more edge, making him even stronger. The thing that pumped his heart faster and made his breath shorter and made him feel like his whole body was being dipped in icy water.
The old man had *crushed Oboe with a single kick*. That was not possible. That was not even *fair*.

"This way, you fuckers! This way!"

Not a good way of thinking about it. Fair didn't exist. Fair was just a lie, and the truth was, that old man was just one more of the liars - the worst kind, the ones who would lie to *themselves*. Otherwise, he'd be on their side, fighting next to them, not pursuing them. To claim the world; the world to the strong, that was their battle.

But lies in the long run made the liars weak. In that, Clarinet believed firmly.

"Here!"

There were two monks standing guard to the infirmary. They assumed fighting positions, but must have known it was hopeless. You could tell their hearts weren't in it. Clarinet left one to his men, but the other, the other he personally unloaded half a magazine into. He might have shouted while doing so, while the torso of the man was literally cut in two by the repeated hammering of bullets from his rifle. That made him feel better. All those years of training, that will to fight, destroyed, in an instant, by *him*. An act of strength. The old man may be freakishly powerful, but it wasn't like when he killed people they'd get any deader than this.

The terrorists all came to a stop in a small room, an antechamber to the infirmary, with waiting seats all around the place and a terrified nurse huddling in a corner. Clarinet inspected the environment with a quick glance, then signalled his men to open the last door. It would be done in a few seconds.

"It's locked!" shouted one of his underlings, helplessly shaking the handle up and down without moving it.

Clarinet shoved him violently aside and tried it himself, to no avail. He took a bit of a run-up, then tried to knock it down with a shoulder hit. It didn't budge.

"Open this!" he shouted, towards whoever was inside.

Back came a thin, terrorised voice. "We can't!"

"Damn right you can!" Clarinet walked away from the door. The nurse had retreated to the further corner of the room and was fidgeting with something on a metal table. She had long blond hair tied in a ponytail. He violently grabbed her by them, and pulled her towards him. The woman screamed as he dragged her back to the door, then pushed a gun to her head. "Open this door or I swear this bitch dies now!"

"But we can't!" answered the doctor from inside, anguished. "We *literally* can't! It's stuck!"

Only then Clarinet noticed the strange, glue-like substance that had seeped under the door, solidifying in place like a frozen puddle.

"They're coming!" screamed one of his other men, alarmed, from behind.

"Shut up, you idiot! Hold to your hostages, they won't hurt us! Giran!" he roared, still angrier. "I know you can tear whatever you put into place down! Do it now!"

There was a pause from inside. "Normally I could," said the ptero's voice, finally, "but see, someone *shot me*, and I can't overexert. I would risk opening my stitches."

"Don't play games with me, lizard! Open it up now, or *she dies!*"
"And lose all leverage you have? I don't think so."

"That's it! Men, get the explosives! We're blowing this door up!"

"But Clar-" answered a voice, and ended in a gargling sound, followed by a thud.

Clarinet turned around, still holding the gun to the nurse's head. Behind him, in the archway between the antechamber and the corridor they'd come from, were the old man, his pupil, Staff Officer Black, a girl with blue hair, and the giant who had fought in the tournament earlier. The thud from earlier was from one of his underlings who was now lying on the ground, knocked out by a single well-placed hand chop.

"Give it up," said the girl, keeping a gun level to his level, she was shaking, the little thing, "you've wreaked enough havoc for today. It ends now."

"Not at all," replied the man, sneering. "You will back down instead. I don't care how fast and strong you are. All I need is one instant. I see one wrong movement, one gesture, I shoot. You want this girl on your conscience?"

"Drop the act, Gray." said Black, dryly. "Let me give you another offer. You let the civilian go, and I don't have you all killed for your treason. You'll get the honour of staying alive to tell me exactly what the fuck is going on here and why."

"You think I'd take betrayal over death? I'm offended, Black. I am loyal. Just not to you."

Clarinet took their measure. At a glance, by numbers and raw strength, they would have had the upper hand. And yet, he thought with a tinge self satisfaction, they were unable to win. They were tangled by it all, their morals, their submissiveness, their lies. Black worried to make the first move and appear too ruthless in front of his new allies, whom he desperately needed. The girl, bold but ultimately all bark and no bite. The kid and the giant, deferring to the old master, chained by his judgement. And the master himself, preoccupied with who knows what concerns. Perhaps just the life of the hostage, as if she'd ever get alive out of this anyway. He didn't seem to have any sense of urgency, in fact, he was slightly smiling. That'd go away, thought Clarinet. All he needed was to order one of his men to do it, like he'd done Oboe. They would have to act then, take a wrong step, and the path to victory would open.

"Flute!" shouted Clarinet. "You-"

And he stopped. The sharp, thin pain of a needle being stabbed in his flesh jolted from his leg to the rest of his body. An annoyance, but not one he expected. He turned to see the nurse he was holding look straight into his eyes, hateful and terrified in the same glance. The syringe was deeply jammed into his thigh, at the right spot to find a vein.

"What was tha-" Clarinet tried to say, but his mouth wouldn't respond, his tongue heavy like a stone. His trigger finger didn't have feeling any more, his arm fell limp. Around him, he saw the enemy zoom around, his men falling one after the other, panic, try to run disgracefully. The old master didn't even need to take part in the crushing of his forces. He was still smiling placidly. He had noticed. He had known.

Clarinet didn't know what exactly was in the syringe. But judging from how he felt as he tumbled to the ground, deadly cold creeping across his now numb body, he suspected it had been entirely too much of it.

"Coffee?"
"Why, thanks, yes. I really need it."

Bulma took the mug Black offered her and stared into the dark liquid for a while in silence. A few minutes after they'd confronted the terrorists who were trying to get to Giran, the police she'd called from the mainland had *finally* arrived, and that had been it. The rest of the criminals had either been mopped up or had managed to escape. The day, however, would still not be over for a while. After all, they'd all been at the heart of a major terrorist incident that *also* marked the possible beginning of an internal conflict within the most powerful mercenary organisation in the whole world. No one was going home until the King's police got some answers.

"Don't worry," said Black, "I will not consider this the trigger for our promised moral philosophy discussion. I suspect you're entirely too worn out for it. If I can be frank, so am I."

Bulma chuckled. She took her first sip, and the warmth nicely spread finally through her body. She wasn't *cold*; but she'd been shaking a lot, and feeling almost as if she was.

"Do they have the final balance?"

"It could have been much worse. Seventeen dead, counting Commander Red, the three men of the escort the turncoats killed at the very beginning, three monks, and nine terrorists we killed among us."

*We* killed. Bulma's feeling of cold seemed to return, despite the coffee.

"That's sixteen," she said. "Who's the last one?"

"A spectator." blurted out Black. "A young man. He was trampled to death at the very beginning of the panic, when no one knew what was going on. Miss Bulma, I realise this must feel awful to you, but do believe me when I say it is almost miraculous. Your men took the situation in their hands efficiently and prevented a disaster by saving individual people and redirecting the flow of the crowd. Our own takedown of the attackers was amazingly fast, thanks to the martial artists that helped us. You have nothing to blame yourself for; you could not see any of this coming. *I* should have, and still did not."

Black stood silent on his own for a long time. Bulma reflected about what seeing something she'd spent her life building undo itself overnight because of betrayal and lies of people whom you'd previously trusted would feel like, before reminding herself that the *something* in question was an organisation whose job was basically killing people for a price. Still, she asked the question.

"What has been of the rest of the Red Ribbon? Should you not go to assist them?"

The other shook his head. "From the news I've received, it's all done, either way. We've lost a lot today. And of course I will go, but right now, the police are especially loathe to let me leave, and I can see why. The Ribbon has always existed in a precarious legal condition, and perhaps more than a bit of that has been thanks to the fact that the King didn't have enough military might to be sure they could even defeat us. Now, that has changed. Some responsibility will need to be taken, and I'll have to do my best to convince them to not disband us entirely. A lot of that may be giving them intel on the bases and forces the traitors have taken from us. I will not shirk from that, if it's what I need to do. I do not know if the Red Ribbon can survive this, but the very least I can do is guarantee to avenge it if it does not."

There was a mighty crack from somewhere a few rooms ahead. A couple minutes later, still limping, helped by a nurse to stand, Giran came through. He didn't seem in good shape, but he certainly was alive. He turned to look at Bulma, even, though she couldn't say if that beak of his had been smiling.
She waved in his direction.

"Mister Black, huh," started Bulma, a bit embarrassed, though she really thought she ought not to be, "my parents will be here soon, and they're likely to be already extremely upset. I believe it would help the matter if they didn't find me chatting amiably with someone my mother has once called, huh, 'a bloodthirsty mercenary'. They will need me to disclose the details very gradually. No offense."

The man chuckled. "None taken. We'll have a chance to talk later anyway, I suspect."

Bulma nodded, and still holding her cup of coffee, she rose up and trailed off. All around her were a few cops and a whole lot of traumatised, shocked, or just completely drained out people. Very few seemed to be entirely fine at the end of this day. One of them was Muten, but even he, she'd gotten the impression, would have something trembling in his voice when he retold the tale of the man who had tried to take Krillin down with a suicide attack. Bulma had wanted to make this an unforgettable day, and boy, had it been one. Somewhere, a monkey's paw finger must have curled. Shenron would have been much better at interpreting her wish.

"Bulma!"

She turned hearing the two voices calling her in unison. Dr. Briefs and Panchy stood together at the entrance, accompanied by a cop. "Mom! Dad!"

She ran to them, and for a moment she could feel herself hesitate in touching them, rethinking of all she'd seen and done during the day, but it was only an instant because they certainly didn't wait for her permission to just grab her and hug her as strongly as they could.

"Bulma, what did I tell you about trouble?"

"Oh, shut up, dad." she replied amidst her own sobs, that she didn't want but really couldn't shut down in any way. "I told you I don't look for it."

"I suppose not. This time, you really did not."

And still, trouble had come. There would be time to tell all the details of it, and even more to discuss their implications, and what would happen. Bulma had the impression that the consequences of today would ripple and dominate their lives for quite a while. Whatever was going on here, it involved Mai, and that meant it probably involved the Dragon Balls, and so it probably involved her. Just her luck, really. One merely looks for a magically granted boyfriend, and here not even one year later she finds herself at the centre of a worldwide terrorist uprising. But still, there would be time to consider all that. At the moment Bulma was happy with just letting herself be hugged a bit. She really, really needed the feeling.

"But Bulma, sweetie," started her mom, as soon as her own sobs had subsided enough to allow her to, "what happened to Goku? Why is he not here with you? He seemed unwell when the TV program got cut."

The girl shook her head. There was no telling where Goku was now, and the police probably wouldn't let her just go look for him. But still, she didn't feel worried at all.

"It's fine," she said, "he's in good hands."

There were flames rising all around, like a storm, a tornado engulfing it all. The old palace burned, the bricks cracked and turned back to sand, the papers flew, carried by the hot drafts, and withered into ashes, and amidst the laughter of a thousand demons, Baba could feel the fire turn to her, eat up
her skin, char her flesh, bleach her bones, and all through the process, she was alive. She just had nothing to scream with any more.

The judge and king of Hell laughed and laughed. Your day has come at last, he said, I told you it would come, it comes for everyone. You should have known better, old witch, you should have known, but you were not less of a fool than the rest of them, fools, the lot of you...

Then there was peace, a moment of bliss as the flames withdrew. A gust of wind from above parted the fire. A path opened up, leading into a distant light. Hesitant, Baba stepped forward on it. Behind her Enma's rant blurred into gibberish as he cursed her for trying to escape his grasp, and the witch left him to it. She walked on, and the flames seemed to turn into as many trees and flowers and blades of grass of glowing crimson, the path now a walkway through a blazing garden. Ahead of her, leading the way, was a woman, with dark hair, an airy mantle flapping around in the wind. The cloth left her right flank for a moment and revealed it bare, missing the arm that should have been there.

Come with me, said the woman, salvation is this way.

Baba hesitated, because even here, even now, she could not help but be suspicious, there always was something that people wanted from her, nothing comes for nothing.

What do you want, she asked. Who sends you, who is your master.

The woman smiled, and pointed to the sky. The witch's eyes followed that finger - and it looked like it took much more than it should to look above, as if there was much more above than usual - and then she finally saw it, something she'd only heard about, something that usually lay outside the reach even of her sight, an ancient visage of green gazing with a tinge of melancholy above the world...

"Are you all right, ma'am?"

Baba came to her senses with a start. She was drenched with sweat, slumped on the back seat of a taxi, her crystal ball comfortably nestled next to her in a stable position. It took her a moment to recover and remember that she was still alive, and where. The Tournament, the attack, and the exhausting and narrow escape from the stadium, which had led to her being on this taxi that was driving her to the heliport so that she could finally leave this place of madness.

"I'm fine. Just think about driving." she croaked with a sore voice. "There's more money for you if you manage it before the rush of traffic that will come in-"

She tossed a quick gaze at her crystal ball.

"-five minutes," she completed.

"Aye, ma'am. On it."

Yes, Baba remembered it all. Everything that had happened, and the woman.

The woman was sitting next to her, with her usual empty expression. She had not said a word since they'd left the compound, and even then, she'd never spoken more than she needed to. A dangerous shared experience is said to create a bond between two people, and Baba could say with certainty that wasn't true at all, because for all that they'd helped each other she cared nothing for this woman and the woman obviously cared nothing for her. But they were going in the same direction, and, well, taxis can be expensive. Especially when you have to toss some hush money on top of the standard fare.
Then, having remembered life, Baba’s mind turned back to the dream. She was not one for flights of fancy, but having the kind of abilities she did, well, one might only wonder. After all, she had never had a dream of her own in the last one hundred twenty seven years.

"You know, your abilities," suddenly said the young woman, as if she'd been the one awakening from a mystical trance, "sure are something."

Baba pondered it for a moment. Then she dug her hand into one of the pockets of her loose robe and drew up a small square of cardboard.

"Have my business card." she said. "In case you may need my services in the future. Rates are pretty good. This year I'm giving a 20% discount on spousal surveillance."

The woman smiled, barely. "Thanks, I'll accept it. Who knows what the future has in store." she said. "Well, besides you, I guess."

*If only*, thought Baba, but that was the kind of thing you did not say in front of prospective customers. She offered the little card that had her name, business, and address on it - or rather, more than address, a set of coordinates. She didn't exactly live in a very populous area. The woman extended her arm and took it into her hand.

Her left hand.

"It's getting hot in here," said Baba. "I'll pull down the window."

The woman didn't object, which was as good a yes as she'd get. The breeze from outside rushed into the car, ruffled hair and clothes, which to Baba was a bliss, as she still could feel it, the heat and the fire, right on her skin. The gusts of air sent the sarong that the young woman next to her was wearing flopping around like a wind sleeve.

On her right side, the witch noticed for the first time, like an empty one.

The taxi sped away, while in the distance the wail of police sirens marked the end of the 21st Tenkaichi Tournament.

Chapter End Notes

This one I managed to publish quickly! Also thanks to the fact that next chapter is pretty short. It's not the end of the arc yet, I needed to split in two because otherwise this would have been a really, really long chapter. And besides, the next part is very different in tone. As a side note: this chapter's title is supposed to reference the Warhammer 40K Dawn of War games. I enjoyed the first one quite a lot (still haven't played the second).
"Goku! Goku, can you hear me?"

Goku could hear him, somehow. There was a giant monkey tumbling through the air, there was the fresh sea wind, and gulls squeaking and zooming out of the way as the mass of the creature almost swept them away, and a brilliant full moon in a dusk that was quickly turning into evening. At the center of this all was Goku, or at least, a fragment of his consciousness. Yet he also felt like he was merely a spectator, observing all of this from afar. Because it was not him moving the creature, not him stupidly grasping for support or growling in frustration at not finding it or whirling his fists around to hit whatever came close out of misplaced anger. Not really him; it was something else.

*I can, but please don't come closer,* thought Goku. *That is not me.*

"I know you can hear me, and I know you can answer! Give me a sign that you're understanding me!"

"But I can't, thought Goku. Gohan kept screaming at the monkey as if it could communicate, as if it was a *human,* and it wasn't. There was the monkey, which was an unthinking beast, full only of anger and desire to destroy. And there was Goku, who was spectating it all, as if behind a glass that not only he couldn't break, but that didn't let his screams and his frantic hitting pass through, muffling all sound to nothing. Goku could only watch as the drama unfolded.

The flight ended abruptly as the monkey smashed into the ground of a nearby island, raising a great cloud of dirt and digging a deep furrow into the land. Whole trees were uprooted and many rabbit warrens met a sudden and unfortunate end. It must have been painful; but the pain, however intense, wasn't Goku's. And he didn't feel a thing.

Right after the monster landed Gohan, far more gracefully. He immediately ran towards the giant monkey.

*No, don't! Stay away!*

The monkey swatted at the old man, annoyed, but he dodged with grace, jumping to the side.

"I've seen you, you know." said Gohan. "A few months ago."

*No, you haven't seen me. That wasn't-*

The monster tried to catch him, now, like one would try to catch a fly, clapping his hands violently.
All he produced was loud shockwaves. The master was way too fast.

"When they tell you that we look on you all the time, you know, that's not exactly true. We wouldn't do anything else otherwise, up there. But we do get the chance to check on you now and then, and I'd heard there was some commotion on a city on Earth that day. Didn't expect the commotion to be you, though."

But it wasn't! I am not it!

A jump, a mistake. The monkey went for a slap where the old man would be, he had no choice, only a fixed parabolic trajectory. Except the slap still ended up hitting only air. A small, directed burst of ki had seen to that, just the right amount of momentum to avoid being caught, propelling Gohan in an unpredictable direction.

"You managed to stop yourself, back then, did you? Can you try that for me again today?"

Goku remembered it, yes. It had been all a daze throughout, but then he had awoken, sort of, still drowning in anger and hate and thirst for destruction. Drowning into another self. And he had managed to drag that self kicking and screaming into doing the one thing that had stopped it for good.

Which made it hurt all the more now, now that he was facing him.

If I could stop myself in West City, why could I not when...?

"Goku, you can do it! You can do better than it, even!" shouted Gohan, above the din of all the destruction the angry monkey caused by trying to just squash him for good. "I don't just believe it; I know it for sure."

But I can't. If I really could, then that makes it so much worse!

"You're the smartest martial artist I've ever known. You've got so much self-control, it's probably too much. We all have a bit of a beast inside, or we wouldn't like it that much, the hitting, the fighting, the pain and the bleeding. Yours is just... more literal, that's it."

Please

"The beast, you cage it. But then it gets the best out of you. And thing is, you don't become a good fighter by caging it. You become a good fighter by taming it and riding it into battle."

stay

"And you want to be a good fighter, don't you? You need to. Even if I didn't raise you that way, you would. It's in your blood. And that's why I'm here today."

away...

But he wouldn't stay away, the old man. And the monster started roaring, and roaring, and Goku fell in terror as he realised what was about to happen, what he'd done. He'd made the monster more powerful. Because now the inside of his throat was glowing. There was energy crackling and fizzling there, there was power, ready to be vomited onto the world and lay waste to it.

Gohan didn't move or budge. He stood his ground. He pulled his hands back.

"Kame..." he started.
He couldn't, he couldn't, shouted Goku, he'd seen him before, and now he was tired from multiple fights too, it would not be enough...

"...hame..."

The monkey jutted its muzzle forward, it wasn't even a scream any more, now the sound was just that of a torrent of ki being erupted in a single beam straight forward, enough to annihilate Gohan and sink the entire island into the ocean. The air was ionised and the wind alone knocked the nearby trees.

"...HA!"

But Gohan wasn't there to take it head on any more. He'd just held out until the last moment, to make the monster focus on him, to make sure its attack would be directed where he wanted it. And then he darted forward, right under the creature's feet, and pushed his hands upwards, fired his own beam of energy. The blow hit under the monkey's jaw, and its whole head was turned upwards. The deadly attack lost itself into the sky, punching a hole through the clouds with the violence of superheated air expanding out of its way. On the ground there were but a few scorches, and the damage done by the air blast. The monster was dizzy, now, almost about to fall backwards. It did manage to find its balance again at the last second, but it was still slow and confused.

Then Gohan started climbing. With a jump, he was on the monster's arm; with another, he came right up to its face. He was standing on the big prominent muzzle of the monkey monster, in front of its red eyes with no pupils and that brow contracted in a perpetual angry frown.

"That's why I came to see you. That why I need to tell you..."

And up there, he just fell to his knees, prostrated himself with the head down on what counted as the ground.

"I am sorry." he mumbled. "I am so sorry for that night."

What? But it's me who...

"I had let myself go with the rice wine. I was drunk. I was careless. I should have known, I should have locked you like I did usually, but I forgot, and I should have handled you like I could always do, like I did today, but I was clumsy and slow. I let you kill me, by my own stupidity."

No, I... it's not your...

"I was a fool, and I deserved it." continued Gohan. "But you did not. You remembered, didn't you? You were too small to become fully conscious, but still, you were aware of something. That was your first time emerging from the haze when you were transformed. And even if not, you were smart enough to figure it out afterwards - always was... well, not always, really, but since that time you fell on your head, yes."

But it wasn't enough! I should have... why are you...?

"And it held you back. Still here, still today, on that ring. It made you afraid of yourself, of your body, of your power. I taught you everything I knew, but when it most mattered, I failed you, and chained you with guilt. And I couldn't spend years up there, watching you grow up, carrying this burden, without coming here to face you, to tell you-

Why are you crying?
"-that I am sorry. It was my fault. Please let me go, drop that weight. Live your life free, and become the most strong and magnificent fighter that you can."

There was no answer, not right then, just the distant hooting of an owl hunting in the night. They stood still in the evening, the moon above them, an old man prostrating over the muzzle of a young monster, or perhaps hugging it. Then the monkey disclosed its jaws. Out of the deep of its throat came a growl, a raucous grumbling.

"...your..."

Gohan's head rose. He may have imagined it. He may have just heard his own hope.

"...not your fault..."

The eyes were still blood red, the voice still that of a raging monkey that could only barely and painfully form words with a larynx that wasn't meant for it. But behind those things was something more.

"It was not your fault, grandpa." said Goku, through the monster's mouth.

"Perhaps." replied Gohan, with a smile like a child's. "But neither it was yours."

They travelled far and fast, on that night. Gohan's time was limited, and there was much they needed to talk about, too much for that beastly mouth that could barely form words. So they travelled. Swimming, running, jumping, with the old man on the monkey's shoulder, and the monkey moving forward with all its power. They travelled and travelled for hours and through many lands, towards the day, until the Moon was behind the horizon to them. They never travelled through populated lands, but some did see them, from afar, a giant dark shadow moving in the night. Legends were born, on that day, of a giant monkey and its journey to the east.

The desert was chilly, the sky just brightening with the first light of the Sun. It didn't help the matters that Goku was naked, even though his grandpa had lent him his own jacket to cover himself.

"Let's heat ourselves up," said Gohan, coming back from a short gathering expedition. He dumped all the dead branches and sticks he'd found in a single bunch, arranged them in a sort of conical shape, and finally used a small burst of ki to light it up. The dry wood quickly caught fire, and the air around it got noticeably warmer.

"So," started the old man, sitting next to his grandson, legs crossed, "I imagine you'll have questions."

Goku did, sure. But he also didn't much feel like voicing them, right now. Rather, he leaned on the side, and let himself linger on his grandfather's body. The man put an arm around his shoulder, hugging him. It was so weird, because it all felt very real, yet Goku could also tell that there was something fundamentally immaterial about the man. His body was warm, but not as much as you'd expect a living one to be. There was a light, faint trace of his smell, much less than you'd have expected after all that exercise. It was a bit like the shadow or reflection of a human being - everything was there, just more evanescent.

And so, of all the possible questions...

"What does it feel like?" he ended up asking.
Gohan thought about it. "It's pretty good, I guess. Some things I can't feel any more, but I don't miss them - I miss missing them, though, if that makes sense. But in general it feels like being at your best, just all the time. Clear mind, sound body."

He hesitated for a second. "Don't be in a rush to come though!" he added, with a laugh. "There's always time for that."

"I was not thinking of it." replied the kid, shaking his head. "I have a friend who's... been there. And come back."

The man whistled in appreciation. "First time I hear of that being possible. I'm impressed."

"Impressive things have happened, recently." admitted Goku. "What she tells of her experience is similar to what you do. But she got in a fight with King Enma. And he sent her to Hell. And so obviously she thinks that even if she goes back, well..."

"I see."

The fire crackled nicely. Goku stared at a thin, lonely twig as it got attacked by the fire, started burning, and slowly crumpled upon itself, blackened, until only a sprinkle of ash was left.

"It's hard to accept, and I don't think it's just." said Gohan. "But it's the way it is. There's Gods upon Gods - don't think Enma is by any means the end of the line. They don't really care, mostly, I think. They just do things the way they're used to. They're people, in a sense, but they're not people the way you and me are. They're just there to do their job. Like things falling down, or fire burning wood. They're there to make sure the world ticks in a certain way, and they're there for those rules that are complicated enough they need a judge. Enma is one of them. There's others - Gods that create and destroy."

"But why does the world have to work in this way?" asked Goku. "I don't think I'd want it to. Do they?"

"They want what they have to want." replied the other, thoughtful. "Well, that's what people say up there. I haven't met enough Gods to tell for sure. If there's a God above Gods who actually decides the rules, I have not heard of them. Maybe it's just as it always was, from the dawn of time. Maybe it's just as random and blind as the reason why fire burns wood."

The kid shook his head. "It's not random, though. Fire burns wood because carbon and oxygen mix in an exothermic reaction, and the free energy of their products is lower than that of the reagents."

That got him a very weird look. "Sorry, just repeating something I read in one of Bulma's books." he said, defensively. "I guess it doesn't change much. We still know what the rules are, but not why they are there."

"Always the big reader, but you changed genres!" laughed Gohan, patting his back. "And you even got a girlfriend that lends you books. A match made in Heaven! Or maybe a bit better than that."

"She's not my girlfriend." pointed out Goku.

The other grinned. "Well, either way. She's surely a friend. You keep her close."

"Even when she goes to Hell?"

Gohan's expression darkened. "I don't know." he said. "I consider myself lucky that I don't know anyone down there. Not everyone is that lucky. I won't say anything about you being able to do
anything about it, because I do not know if it is possible. But I know you will try. Does she have a plan?"

"Becoming immortal, I think." said Goku.

The old man laughed. "Well, that's a first! You definitely should stick by her side. Sounds like interesting things will happen as long as you're close to her. Speaking of which. Do you understand what has happened earlier? When you were a monkey?"

Goku shifted uncomfortably on his legs. "I managed to take back control? But if I could do that, then why when you were-"

"I told you." interrupted him Gohan abruptly. "You were too little. Don't even think about it. Listen, why do you think I took that risk? Not cutting your tail immediately? Why do you believe I was so sure that you could do it?"

The kid's eyes widened. "You heard of others like me." he whispered.

The other nodded. "You meet all sorts of people up there, people not all from this planet, you see. But thing is, when I talked about you, some of these people started to recognise, well, some details. They told me stories."

"Are you saying," asked Goku, "that you found out I'm an alien?"

"Goodness, no!" replied Gohan. "That, I knew from the beginning."

Following the falling star had been a whim. It sounded like a crazy idea, but Gohan had also often heard stories about legendary swords and weapons forged out of sky-iron, which made him think it was not perhaps so crazy. If falling stars were chunks of ore tumbling down from the sky, then recovering one could fetch quite a price, and the eternal gratitude of one lucky blacksmith. Living in the mountains was pretty cheap, but he could really use some coin to buy tiles for the hut's roof. Rain had become a bit of a problem recently with the straw, and he wasn't a great thatcher.

When he came closer he could realise that he was on the right track easily enough. The blast had knocked a whole area of the forest down, all trees pushed in the same direction, like wheat stalks stomped by a giant foot. Closer still, and the trees were burning. The ground itself was scorching hot. He had to wait a while for it to cool down enough to approach.

The impact had caused a vast round crater. At the center of it was a chunk of... something. It wasn't iron, though, that much Gohan could tell, to his dismay. It was spherical, and covered in soot and dirt, but when he passed his hand over it, he could reveal a white, gleaming surface, with an unreal degree of polish for something that had undergone so much punishment. In some parts he could feel seams, rivets, and at one point, he found a transparent, smooth surface, like glass. Then, suddenly, the thing hissed. As if on cue, perhaps having cooled down under some fixed threshold, it puffed out some gas and unsealed itself, shaking off the remaining dirt while a large hatch opened itself.

Inside, Gohan could see the thing he'd least expected to see inside a big ball of metal that had fallen from the sky. A baby, naked, sucking his thumb. And a monkey's tail attached to his back that was now curling slightly at the touch of the fresh air that came in from outside.

"...naturally, at the time, I didn't really think of you as an alien." said Gohan, at the end of his story. "Rather, I thought you had been sent down by Heaven for some reason, and the white shell was your cradle. Or an egg. Monkeys or boys aren't born of eggs, but what did I know of heavenly affairs? It
took me dying to learn about other worlds, and people living on them, and all that stuff. I never told you because it felt like it would bear ill. Perhaps that if you'd learn you'd as soon want to find a way back to where you belonged, and I'd lose you to the Gods."

The fire was dying down now, but it was fine, as the sun had risen and the land was awash in its light and warmth. "I learned that was not the case soon enough, once I started meeting the other souls. Took me a while to find someone whose language I could understand, but bit by bit I learned, and some of them had learned already the language of Earth. When they heard me describe you they had..."

He paused for a second.

"...reactions. They had these stories of people with tails, and bushy black hair, and who would transform into giant strong monkeys. It's not just the Earth's moon that works for that, you know? Except in their tales, these were warriors, and when they transformed, they kept fighting, fully in control of themselves. So I thought, hey, if some space chump can do it, I'm sure my Goku can do it even better!"

The kid smiled faintly. His eyes were fixated ahead, his mind was untangling the revelations, and in spite of the warmth of the moment, there was something cold going on behind there, Gohan could perceive. He wondered if the question would come.

"You say you heard stories of people like me," said Goku, slowly, "but not of meeting any."

"Goku," said his grandfather, shaking his head. "Goku, you are you. They were your people, but they did not raise you, they did not teach you. I did that. Your friends are doing that now. Bulma and her parents and all those others."

"But you could not meet any of them," he continued. "Because they are all in Hell."

"I think you're not ready for that part of the story, yet," blurted out Gohan. "They were a warlike people, and let's leave it at that. Besides, you know it yourself. Enma isn't the fairest of judges, or a paragon of goodness. Don't tell him I said that, though. I don't think he can revoke a judgement, but I'd rather not risk it."

He chuckled, but really, the joke didn't feel that funny to either of them. They let it drop, and for a long time, neither of them said anything. Goku kept ruminating about all he'd learned, but he did not speak out his thoughts. He just slid down, laying his head on his grandfather's lap, and stayed there, looking up, to the sky, while the old man gently ruffled his hair.

"...and your technique with those ki bullets is impressive. Did you really come up with it yourself?"

"With Bulma's help. See, she built these machines that help you see your ki, and so it makes it a lot easier to manipulate it."

"Ah, that makes sense. Still, what a clever girl! I can see why you get along so well."

"..."

"But say, Goku, why didn't you try anything more powerful? Those blasts lack a bit of, you know, oomph, to really do damage."

"I don't see much the point. I can fire off more powerful beams, but my control decreases. At my maximum, I need to keep completely still, it's a big drain, the energy isn't very manoeuvrable and
then in most fights it'd be pretty useless like-

"Like? Why did you stop?"

"Uh..."

"Like my Kame-hame-ha, you were about to say, huh? That what you think?"

"..."

"Ha! You're letting this tech stuff get to your head, boy. Let me tell you something. The Kame-hame-ha is the secret technique of the Turtle school. Muten himself spent decades to perfect it. Though, sure, he could have done it faster if he had your equipment. Now, you're right, that kind of fine control you've learned isn't easy, and Muten himself could never learn it on his own. So he had to go for something else."

"But why then go all the way to maximise power?"

"Think, Goku. Because if you can't make it weak enough to not be a drain or a vulnerability, you won't use it in battle during a regular exchange of blows anyway. But what you can make out of it is a formidable weapon against the opponent's morale. You've seen my fight with Muten. Imagine not knowing the technique - not having ever seen anything like it - and facing an opponent who slowly charges it up. Suppose you're too distant to get to them before they finish. Then you won't know how big it will be, or how much powerful. You don't know how to dodge. And if it fires off, you're faced with this immense power, power enough to obliterate a mountain - coming right at you. What's your reaction then?"

"To run away. Or surrender, if the situation is desperate."

"Precisely! The Kame-hame-ha is a weapon of the mind as much as it is of the body. Its mere existence has helped build up the legendary reputation of the Turtle school. And as far as attacks go, you know, it's not too bad. There's a trick to it, the hand pose and the way it allows you to manipulate ki. But the long and short of it is, it's probably as manoeuvrable as such a powerful attack is going to get, which helps. Comes real useful against big, slow targets too. Like you earlier."

"..."

"Something on your mind?"

"Big and slow. What you said about the Kame-hame-ha applies to my transformation too, right?"

"...I was thinking of it, yes. It's certainly scary. Too much on the slow side to be useful against a really skilled opponent of similar strength - you'll provide a much easier target and will have proportionately more problems hitting or grabbing them, which makes it less beneficial than the sheer increase in power might make you think."

"So you're saying it makes no difference?"

"Not at all! It's still a net gain, the way I see it. If used with proper skill, just like the Kame-hame-ha. You would just need to develop special techniques for it, and know when and how to use it."

"And just happen to fight my enemies on a full Moon night."

"Eh, yes, that too."
"...Big Monkey? Primate King?"

"Grandpa..."

"Maybe if I can think of some old myth... there was one with a monkey who..."

"Grandpa, really, we don't need to give it a name."

"Of course we do! All the great masters' good techniques have names. It's part of what makes them scary. You want people to whisper in awe... oh, here comes Goku of the... of the..."

"..."

"...Great Ape! Yes, I like that. Nice ring to it."

"Grandpa, apes don't have tails."

"That's why it's clever! You turn into a Great Ape, and your opponent expects, well, an ape, right? And then, out of nowhere, tail whip! Wham!"

"..."

"A cunning ruse, if I say so."

"...then she managed to grab the creature, while it was turned into an insect. She ran to the oven and locked it inside, and burned it so bad that it had to transform into... uh... something really small, that it couldn't go back to. Sorry, it's a bit hard to explain."

"More science stuff, huh?"

"Yes, and not the kind I studied much yet."

"Ha. That's fine. Goku, remember when I'd tell you scary stories at bedtime to mess with you?"

"Yes."

"Consider yourself avenged. If I needed to sleep, after that one, I wouldn't be able to for one week straight."

"..."

"..."

"...you were messing with me?"

"Anyway, Goku, I just realised..."

"What?"

"I won."

"..."

"The Tournament! I won. You hit the ground of the island before me, so I won by ring out."
"You're right. I wasn't really thinking about it. Congratulations, I guess?"

"Just 'congratulations'? Goku, I've wanted my whole life to win this thing! That devilish old man Muten kept me from it the first time we participated, to teach me a lesson, he said. Is 'congratulations' all you can think of? Not even a bit of disappointment? You arrived to the final, you should have cared."

"So I'm told. But I really wanted to just test my strength and learn more about my abilities, and well... when I saw you, I didn't really think of much else at all anyway."

"That's... really sweet of you Goku."

"What did you expect? I thought you were dead. I mean, you are."

"True, true. I may have lost perspective, being among dead people all the time. When you're alive, seeing someone you thought you'd lost forever, that's far more exceptional than a measly Tournament."

"..."

"That I won."

"Grandpa!"

"...what will you do now, then?"

"I do not know. I will probably just go back to training with Bulma's equipment, and help her with her experiments. In a few months, we will go back looking for the Dragon Balls. She promised me a wish, or to keep the sphere you left me. I was thinking of resurrecting you, but-"

"Out of the question! I told you, live your life, let me lie. I'm happy enough to have seen you doing so well."

"Then I guess I could just keep the ball. Though I doubt Bulma would be much happy with it."

"Hm, can't blame her. I left you that thing thinking it was just a pretty bauble. I am happy to hear you cared so much, but it sounds like a lot could be done with the Dragon Balls. Good, or bad. Perhaps leaving one lying around and all of them unused just for my sake is not the smartest thing."

"I can see that, yes. It's just... I spent so much time. It's silly."

"...what?"

"Thinking that your soul was in the Ball. Talking with it."

"I know."

"...you do?"

"Yes. I would listen to you, now and then. I told you, we can look down sometimes. It's clearer if it's around someone we know, too. I've seen you talk and heard much of what you said. And I will keep doing so, even if you don't speak to the four-star Dragon Ball any more. So... do what you think is right. And if you have something you would like to wish for, go for it."

They stopped walking. Even though barely eight hours had passed since they left Papaya Island at
sunset, now it was midday, and they were in some other part of the globe. Where, exactly, they didn't know. But there it was, finally, a city, with tall glass skyscrapers shining of a violent light under the sun. A few minutes away, if they really put in some effort running.

"So," said Gohan, sitting down, "I think this is as far as I go."

Goku sat next to him. He'd understood already the terms of Gohan's stay.

"It's been twenty four hours, already?" he asked, quietly.

"Yes, Baba brought me here yesterday morning." explained the other. "Needed time enough to register at the Tournament and go through the eliminator rounds. I wished I could get more time with you, but... it was a lot, still. Enough, I hope."

The kid nodded. "I am just happy to know that you don't hate me." he mumbled.

"Oh, you silly...! How would you even think that." He smiled, and hugged Goku tightly to his chest. "But it's alright. I get it."

Goku let himself be kept that way. Gohan's smell and body heat were not as a living being already; but now, now they felt even more evanescent, closer to disappearing in thin air, like the memory of a dream too soon forgotten after waking up.

"Thanks. For all the help and, and what you taught me today."

"Well, I'm basically your first master." said the old man, scratching is moustache. "It was my duty. Which makes me think... technology is all fine and good, but you might benefit from some old school training. You've gotten clever and have a lot of techniques, but your physical strength is a bit lacking. How much can you lift?"

"Huh." Goku's eyes trailed off, slightly embarrassed. "About... thirty tons?"

"What!" Gohan reacted with exaggerated outrage. "That's less than me at your age. That won't do, won't do at all. Why don't you ask your friend to let you off for a while and go train with master Muten? I am sure he'd be happy to have you, he seems quite interested in you already, if you ask me. And you'd get to spar with Krillin again, too. It would be great experience. Training by yourself is fine, but only goes so far."

"I am not always by myself, there are others. But if you say that he's good..."

"Oh, the best! Mind you, a debauched old fool, but when it comes to martial arts, there's no better fighter on this Earth."

He eyed Goku with a malicious grin.

"Yet."

"I will do it." said the kid. "And I will grow stronger. Just... just watch me."

The old man smiled again, and for one moment Goku thought he could forget all that happened in between, feel again like it was just the two of them, in the mountains, living off the land and scaring the animals of the forest with their sparring.

"Of course." said Gohan, and then he vanished, just like that.

Goku lingered for long minutes in front of that spot, not knowing what to do. It felt silly to try to talk
more, and pointless to pray, with all he'd seen and learned; but still, it felt like that moment ought to be acknowledged in some way, he could not just turn around and leave.

Eventually, he did. And when he snapped out of that night-long dream (well, a night for him; but it really had been more of a morning in this part of the world he'd spent it in), he remembered with a jolt all that was happening before he was tossed away from the Tournament. He had not worried too much because he trusted Bulma and the others to handle everything properly; but still, he ought to worry, a bit. He wondered whether he should call the Kintoun, but thought against it, and limited himself to run at a sustained pace; which to him meant he covered the ten kilometres of distance in as many minutes. He decided he should not shun any chance for training, considering what his grandfather seemed to have thought of his physical shape.

He did not know the city at all, but it was not too dissimilar from the metropolis he was used to. He had, of course, no money on him, and while he'd been too distracted and thoughtful to notice, the stares he got from people around him made him realise that the jacket that he'd received from Gohan had disappeared with him, and now he was walking around naked. Good thing that, being a child, that didn't get him outright arrested, but it still drew attention. Soon Goku had to explain himself to a cop; and to the cop he said that he was a competitor in the Tenkaichi Tournament, had gotten lost, and really needed access to a phone so that he could call his trainer, Bulma Briefs, who could explain everything and come pick him up. To which the cop reacted the way one would have expected him to react to a naked boy claiming to come from the other side of the planet and be friends with the daughter of the world's richest family, namely, by calling more of his colleagues to share the fun. Patiently, and with perfect seriousness, Goku repeated the story many times, always eliciting the same amount of laughter.

Then the one cop who did have a passion for martial arts in the district was called, and he noticed that the kid indeed was suspiciously similar to the one who had fought the final fight last night, before that unfortunate interruption. Goku had inquired about the interruption, and suddenly, everyone had gotten really serious. There was talk of an attack, of shots fired and people killed in the open; of terrorism and of one of the greatest private military organisations in the world, big enough that the Royal Defence Force would rather not tangle with it, being torn asunder by internal conflict. Goku did not like the sound of any of that, and begun to wonder if his trust in Bulma and the others sorting it out had not been optimistic. He even pictured for an instant Bulma dead, and everyone else blaming him for it, because he had lingered spending time with his dead grandfather for the only night he could be on Earth rather than going back to help her. He quickly rejected that picture, though. Bulma Briefs was a famous name; had she been among the casualties, he would have learned of it.

It took some more time to convince the cops that he really was who he said he was, despite the similarity. The matter was settled when Goku, very calmly, grabbed the metal pole of a nearby road sign and squeezed and bent it in one hand like putty, to then reply, to the angry and terrified cops who demanded to know who his parents were and with what money he planned to repay for the damage, that his guardian was to all effects Bulma Briefs, and that calling her would have solved both matters in one go. To which they finally threw their hands in the air and led him to a phone, exasperated, and tossed an old uniform's jacket on him so that he could cover up already, thankyouverymuch.

Goku had memorised Bulma's phone number. She had asked him to, just in case. Given that he was prone to violent transformations that could leave him naked and without memory of the last hours, that had seemed like a reasonable precaution. The phone on the other side rang for a long time, and the space between each ringback seemed to him longer than usual, even though it couldn't really be.

"Who is this? I don't recognize-"
"BULMA, IT'S ME!" practically shouted Goku.

There was a moment of stunned silence on the other side. "...Goku?"

"Yes! I'm-

"Oh, thanks Heavens! You can't believe-

There were at least five minutes during which both talked over each other, excitedly listing all the information that they thought was really really essential the other ought to know right now. Of course, neither understood a word of it. The cops merely looked on in sheer bafflement.

"...and so I'm in some city that I don't know what is called..."

"Orange City." intervened one of the policemen.

"...Orange City," continued Goku, without pausing for breath, "and I need you to come pick me up."

"Orange City? How did you get that... ah, never mind, stupid question." said Bulma. "Look, I'll have you picked up by one of our pilots. Can't come myself, I would like to but there really is no time. We'll meet in the Capital. I don't think you'll have much useful to tell since you left almost immediately, but you're still expected to come. Oh, and I'll have to get you some fancy clothes."

"Expected to come?" Goku frowned. "Fancy clothes?"

"Yes, sorry but your usual gi won't cut it this time." said the girl. "We've been summoned for a meeting with the King."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay - with this chapter, the Tenkaichi Tournament arc is officially wrapped up! Next chapter is another long one, and a bit of a transitional one. I might slow down a bit for the next couple of weeks as I'm still trying to figure out some details about the oncoming arc, which is going to be the longest and most complex yet. Thanks for the reviews as usual, keep 'em coming!
Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the idea and characters of Dragon Ball are owned by Akira Toriyama. This is a simple non-profit fan parody.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 24 - The council of Furry

West City Gazette, May 8, 750

The first day of the rest of our lives, by Hank Firecracker

[...] My readers know I have often said much about Capsule Corporation, Bulma Briefs, the way her research might shape our future, and the accountability I would expect to come with that power. I have certainly not been afraid of expressing criticism where I saw it fit to do so. Some people have suggested to me that they expected whatever I wrote today to be a similar indictment. A loud and proud 'I told you so', crowning my campaign of the last months.

The truth is, I did not tell you so. I did not tell you so because what happened yesterday on Papaya Island, and all across the world, was beyond imaginable for me, as it was for you all, and, I expect, for Bulma Briefs. While she certainly was involved in the organisation of the Tournament, I am sure she did as much as possible to prevent any reasonable threats to its safety. But what happened was not reasonable in any sense of the word.

As I am writing this, we are still receiving the numbers. Seventeen dead on Papaya island, but that is perhaps the lightest toll. Other locations across the world were the sites of fighting, sometimes very destructive, between forces belonging to the Red Ribbon army and its seceding terrorist faction, whose objectives and motives are still unknown. Many of these battles only saw victims from the army itself, which may make them register lower on our attention, but make no mistake, they showed a military might on display that is absolutely terrifying to know in the hands of a terrorist organisation. With five of the biggest Red Ribbon bases fallen in the hands of what amounts to a loose cannon faction, the entire North-East territory of our main continent seems to be effectively under the control of the insurgents, with not enough firepower from either the Royal Defence Forces or even the Red Ribbon itself to contrast their presence. The dead and wounded of yesterday, I fear, may only be the bloody prologue to a dark chapter of our lives indeed. The King has not released a statement yet; but reliable observers tell us that many important military personalities, as well as all the key actors of the drama that played yesterday at the Tenkaichi Tournament, have been ferried to the Capital and convoked for an emergency hearing with His Majesty himself, or one might be inclined to say, a war council [...]

The trip from Orange City to the Capital took a few hours by plane. His Kintoun would have been faster, but Goku was tired, and besides, he needed more than just transport. For starters, it had been a good time to get up to date on the situation. Bulma did not have as much time as she wanted, wrapped as she was in her own preparations for the imminent meeting, but they still managed to
spend enough on a long video call to get the basic facts of what had happened to both of them down. Goku listened speechless to Bulma's rough account of the evening - and her insistent reassurances that he shouldn't blame himself for not being there, not with all that was going on for him. Bulma, despite her generally somber mood, was shortly turned into an excitedly squealing mess at the knowledge that he could now control his transformations, not to mention the whole bit about him being actually an alien, but she quickly decided that topic was better reserved for a time of greater privacy. It's not like she could understand much of what had gone on in ten minutes over the phone anyway.

Once he'd wrapped up the call, Goku was serviced by a tailor who had been generously paid by Bulma's family for the extravagant job and who fitted him with what were considered clothes suitable to meeting a sovereign. On Goku's part, he thought they seemed more suitable to confining a madman who would otherwise go wild. Perhaps that was their purpose, to guarantee the safety of the King by restraining his guests. However, he categorically refused, in spite of the tailor's heated objections, to let him wrap what seemed like a silk noose around his neck. As a principle, he would never wear something that would enable an opponent to grab and strangle him so easily at a moment's notice.

Finally, the plane landed vertically on a platform on top of the Royal Palace; from there he was handed to two guards who showed him around and eventually led him to the large antechamber in which those waiting for an audience with the King were seated.

"Goku!"

Seeing him walk into the room, Bulma ran to hug the kid. She bent over and squeezed him, like she was making sure he was indeed the right size and shape, despite all the time they'd spent talking earlier.

Then she withdrew and buried her hand in a bag, suddenly remembering something.

"You left this at the tournament." she said, pulling out a short wooden stick that fit well in her palm and handing it to Goku. "You would rather have it with you, right?"

"Oh, right."

Goku grabbed the stick and with a thought he stretched it out from that compact size he'd left it in for easy storage to his pole's usual length of one meter or so, then whirled it among his hands for a while, feeling its familiar weight. He had not enjoyed much being forced to fight completely unarmed at the Tournament. But in the end, he let it shrink again and handed it back to Bulma.

"Best to leave it here," he said, "I imagine we are not supposed to bring weapons with us when meeting the King."

"You're not wrong. I'll leave it in my luggage with the guards here, they don't need to know what is it." Bulma dropped the magical item back into the bag. "And you're, well-"

She looked at him, head to feet, wearing the finest kid-sized suit her money had managed to buy at such short notice - but with an unbuttoned shirt, no tie, and what must have been a hastily cut hole for his tail in the back of his trousers.

"It's terribly constricting." grumbled Goku. "And it makes me hot."

"Don't get ahead of yourself, now." said the girl, giggling. "It makes you elegant. At best."

"Hm." The boy couldn't help sounding disgruntled, as he uncomfortably wiggled inside his clothes.
"How are you? The things that happened at the Tournament sounded very-"

"Fine. I'm fine," snapped back Bulma, with a dismissive gesture. "I mean - what does not kill you makes you stronger, right? Well, I have to be plenty strong by now."

Goku nodded, unconvincing, but let the matter drop. He took a look at the rest of the people assembled on the seats of the room, or standing around talking. Bulma's father, Giran, master Muten, who was seemingly trying to call someone on the phone, and Pilaf, who looked extremely nervous and wary of all the guards scuttering around. The only unfamiliar face, besides the guards that escorted them, was a tall black man wearing a military uniform. He did recognize the red logo on his chest though - he had seen it often when they had discussed Mai and researched her past.

"I'm sorry," said master Muten suddenly, passing the cell phone back to one of the guards, "but I can not seem to contact my sister. If she does not desire to be spoken to, there really is no way to do so."

The guard scoffed. "How does she even know it's you calling, and not a customer?"

"Perks of her profession, I'd say." the old man smiled. "I'm afraid we will have to hold our meeting without her. But she is not the most talkative sort, so I suspect even if she were here we would not learn much from her if she wasn't in the mood to let us."

"Very well." the guard looked in Goku's direction. "The boy has arrived too, I see. I'll go report to the King then."

He trotted away to an adjacent room.

"Goku, I'm happy to see you well." Dr. Briefs walked up to his daughter and her friend. He, too, was wearing a rather formal attire, an image almost as incongruous as that of Goku. "We were all worried yesterday, but then, it was a crazy evening for everyone."

"So I hear." said the kid. "I still do not understand well all that happened. Bulma gave me a summary, and the tailor that put me in these clothes, on the plane, explained only what he had heard on TV, and that did not seem much. I don't get much of the consequences of it all."

"I still do not have a clear picture myself." said the doctor, sending a side glance to his daughter. "But I understand this meeting will be a chance to clarify many things. A lot has happened, all over the world. This may well be the start of a war."

The throne room door opened again, and the guard from before walked out.

"The King has consented to meet you. Please form a queue, and we'll let you enter one by one after a short search..."

The short search took almost one hour between all of them, and required them to move into a small booth, strip down, and prove that they had no weapons on their body to an examiner of their own sex, with various degrees of protesting involved (Pilaf's shrieks of indignation could be heard from a couple cities away). Then they were all admitted into the room.

If they had expected anything especially solemn or royal, they were sorely disappointed. What they were made to seat in was merely a very large conference room, with a circular table running in an almost complete ring around a podium, with just enough of a gap to let a speaker go take their place at the centre. When they stepped in, the room was empty; or at least, empty of any human presence. At the head of the table and to its left and right, for almost half of the circle, were sets of TV screens with webcams hooked on top, replacing the actual speakers on their seats. At a glance Bulma could
see many faces on those screens that she recognised from one or another news report - Zeeman, Minister for Science, Pitt from Interior, General Liu of the Royal Defence Force and Minister of Defence, and many other political or military authorities. And the screen at the head of the table showed none other than King Furry, the blue anthropomorphic dog that had ruled the greatest part of the world for a couple decades now, his bespectacled eyes set in a worried frown.

"What is the meaning of this?," started complaining Pilaf. "We get searched like some kind of terrorist and then-"

He stopped himself short of finishing that sentence, partly because of the glare he got from one of the guards escorting him, partly because of a sudden jolt of self-awareness about his role as would-be usurper. There were snickers and expressions of slight outrage from the various ministers. The King, however, did not seem to take it badly.

"I am sorry that you have been inconvenienced so," he said, shaking his head. "Despite all the thought he gave to the question, my chief of security could not see a way to protect us from so many people well able to kill us with their bare hands. There were too many uncertainties, and too much danger for us all to be so vulnerable. So we all are speaking to you from a secret location, and we can hear and see all you are doing in turn. We hope you do not take it as a sign of a lack of trust."

"Not at all, Your Majesty." said Bulma, with a slight curtsy. "In fact, it seems eminently sensible to me. It is a dangerous time."

"We're glad you understand. Let us then go to the heart of the matter. You are all here because you are all involved in various ways with an incident that threatens to shake the bedrock of peace my whole dynasty has been built on for three centuries. You, all together, possess information that we need going ahead."

He hesitated for a moment, as if pondering if to add something.

"I believe," he said finally, "the first thing we should hear is the account of the new commander of the Red Ribbon. Commander Black, if you please."

Black stepped up and walked to the podium, while the rest of the group sat down. He stayed imperturbable amidst the icy stares of the members of the government, and especially of those from the Royal Defence Force. It was common knowledge that there was no trust or love between their two militaries, with such different outlooks and objectives. To most members of the RDF, Ribbon soldiers would be little more than common criminals.

"Your Majesty," said Black, "I will relay the most recent information I have received. This is by no means a final tally, but I believe it will convey the extent of the damage."

He cleared his voice, and started consulting a large wad of printed papers.

"Yesterday, around 19:30 hours, Capital Time," he started, "a large coordinated attack has begun on the forces of the Red Ribbon, from internal enemies of motivation hitherto unknown. The fighting has involved seven main sites; six were major Red Ribbon bases, and one was the Papaya Island Tenkaichi Tournament grounds, where I was personally located, escorting the late Commander Red. This last attack resulted in seventeen casualties, of whom nine were insurgents and four members of the Red Ribbon. The apparent objectives of the enemy were to kill Commander Red and mr. Giran, who is here today with us. The latter attempt having been averted, I would consider the operation at least a partial success. However-"

"Success my ass." growled Giran. "Something important has been stolen from me."
Black raised his eyebrows at the comment, then quickly skimmed through the reports up to a tagged page.

"-the rest of the fighting has been much bloodier, and not quite as successful for our side," he continued. "The Red Ribbon possesses eight main bases across the world. It seems the enemy has carefully planned this action for years, and has infiltrated the higher ranks of our organisation. This allowed them to strategically transfer and relocate personnel throughout the world. As a result, the highest concentration of these traitors was found in the north-east region of this continent. The Muscle Tower, our northernmost base, fell in minutes, with our loyal men being taken by surprise and killed before they had time to react by those whom they considered trusted companions. A similar fate hit three other bases, only one of which managed to oppose what still amounted to only a symbolic resistance. The fighting was over in less than half an hour. We have no way to produce a tally of the casualties, but the total of our forces hosted by those bases included something like 70,000 men, more than half our forces, of whom we estimate that at least 80% must have switched to the insurgent side, and the remaining 20% to be lost. Vast amounts of equipment have been lost as well, including armoured and air divisions. A few survivors have managed to escape and some are being collected as we're talking, and hopefully they will manage to give us more detailed information."

There was a murmur among all the screens. The King alone didn't flinch and kept listening intently.

"Another base, the Desert Fox Den, which is located south of here, approximately at the same latitude as West City, has been heavily contested for long enough to evacuate part of our loyalist forces, but is now in the hands of the insurgents. Our men gave them a real fight, though, so hopefully they will be too busy licking their wounds for a while before they can do anything."

"Then we must attack!," shouted General Liu, "This is way too close to two of our major cities. If we can take them by surprise while they're still weak-"

"I think they will be aware of it too," agreed Black. "If it were me, I would simply strip the base of all useful equipment, then withdraw to a less exposed position and blow up everything that is nailed to the floor. So I think it's safe to assume they will do that."

"Then we could try cutting their escape route. If they're going to move towards the north-east, we can mobilise quick enough to stop them."

"But in doing so you would expose yourself to being attacked from two sides if their north-eastern forces come to their rescue, and-"

"Please, don't digress," intervened the King. "General Liu, don't be too eager to declare a war before we know all the facts. Yes, these terrorists have committed some horrible actions. So have, at times, the soldiers at the orders of the Commander who stands before us right now."

Black adjusted his tie. "Not at my orders, technically." he said. "But I will not deny involvement is some of the actions that have made the name of the Ribbon infamous across the world."

"You will not deny it?" said the Minister for Interior. "You should be brought to the gallows for them!"

"I was only brought here with the explicit guarantee that I would be treated as a diplomatic representative." replied Black, unflinching. "So you can drop the posturing, Minister."

"The guarantee stands," intervened the King. "However, so do the Ribbon's past crimes against the citizenship. Many resent it for those crimes, and I among them. Just because I have not seen fit to act
Black arched his eyebrows. Among the council there were no signs of support, and the attention had been shifted from new enemies to old resentments. Looking at the scene, Bulma almost felt like she was attending a trial now.

"Your Majesty, let us drop all pretence," finally said the accused. "I am Commander of an army that is no more. The father of our late Commander Red created it in a world in which many smaller kingdoms existed and resisted Your Majesty's authority, and working as mercenaries to settle disputes among them was a profitable, and legal, business. That world has disappeared. Your Majesty's reign has seen to that, by reunifying those kingdoms under a single banner-"

"And without firing a single shot." pointedly remarked the King.

"Indeed. The Ribbon could not sustain itself any more by those means, and its strength that kept it in a precarious balance with your forces is now gone. Yes, we did some disreputable things. We got away with them because no one could stop us without causing a major global war. And we still were haemorrhaging money. It was only a matter of time before our whole capital would be dilapidated, and our Army dissolved or massively downsized. Our Commander was simply too naive to see that."

"Are you admitting that now we could squash you no problem, Black?" said General Liu, with a smug smile.

"I'm saying now you would almost sure to win in the end." replied the Commander. "Not that it would be easy or bloodless. Our men are still far more trained and battle-weathered than your soldiers who have never seen war or combat beyond a few skirmishes with desert bandits, General. The same, unfortunately, holds for the insurgents. They are more numerous and have a solid hold over the North-East. You could perhaps defeat them, but they would give you a hard time, and they hold North City as a hostage."

"That will not be something I will see under my reign," proclaimed the King. "The RDF will perform its job and defend the main inhabited areas. That is to take absolute priority over anything else until we know enough to make better plans. Commander Black, you admit therefore that the Red Ribbon can not survive this crisis. How many forces do you have left that still answer to you?"

"Some 50,000 men, Your Majesty. Three major bases, including Headquarters, in the western peninsula. Tanks and planes and artillery, but not as many as the insurgents. It was a heavy blow we took yesterday."

The King nodded. "Very well. You sound like a reasonable man, Commander. I trust then that you see what the most reasonable path is, going forward?"

"I do." admitted Black. "I would not have become an officer if I could not tell when a battle is lost. We will not pointlessly fight and put the world to the fire, Your Majesty. However, I have two objections to make. The first is I would like to point out that even in the eventuality of the Red Ribbon's-" he paused for a moment, weighing the word he was about to utter, "-disbandment, a general amnesty for all its members from any past crimes they're proven or suspected of having committed is the least we would need to guarantee that the men even obey the order to disband in the first place. But more than that will probably be necessary."

"An amnesty?" Pitt was outraged. "Do you think we'll let you-"

"We will." intervened the King, cutting him off shortly. "If it leads to a smoother transition and
prevents blood being spilt, an amnesty is a given. I will not sacrifice my subjects' lives on the altar of justice. We can discuss the rest later."

"Very well, Your Majesty. The second thing is, I do not believe similar negotiations could be held with the insurgents. Your Majesty will likely agree with me after learning the details I have already heard about. And I have some very... strong feelings about them, after what they did to us. I am sure many of my men share those. So I think it would be best for both of us if the Red Ribbon could fight one last war. The one against this enemy. Your Majesty's forces will be bolstered in the upcoming fight, and the Red Ribbon will get to sink its fangs in the enemy that destroyed it, and drag it down with itself. I believe it only fair."

The King thought about it for a moment. "Very well, Commander." he said. "If I will be convinced that there is a need for such a war, you will be welcome to take to the front line. Perhaps that could repay some of the ill you have done to this world. But be warned, to convince me that such a thing is indeed needed is a high bar to clear. After all, I did allow you to exist for all this time; do not think I have been happy with this arrangement for one second of my reign."

"I appreciate the sincerity, Your Majesty. I have said my piece." Black bowed slightly. "As for clearing that bar, mr. Giran was the one who survived the enemy's attack. Perhaps he may tell us more about their motives...?"

"Very well. Mr. Giran, come forward, and speak to your King."

Giran shifted on his too small chair, trying to get up from the too low table, pushing himself against his crutch. He winced in pain, as the table pressed against his wound. Some of the ministers appeared impatient.

"Your Majesty, ah...," he mumbled, "if I may..."

"You are excused. You can speak from your current seat." said the King. "Please."

"Ah, thank you, Your Majesty." said the ptero, dropping back on his seat. For all his usual bluster, he seemed genuinely intimidated standing amidst so many powerful people. "Right, so. I'm not a great speaker or anything - uhm - let's see. You all know about the Demon King Piccolo, I suppose?" There were murmurs and glances exchanged between the ministers.

"Of course I do." said simply the King. "My entire dynasty rose to power in the wake of his defeat."

"Right. So." Giran cleared his voice. "I come from a certain tribe. We live in the southwestern peninsula - Your Majesty wouldn't be interested in where exactly, we are just a simple people, minding our own business. At least, that's now. Three hundred years ago, not so much."

"See at that time, you humans - not you, Your Majesty, of course, you know what I mean - well, humans weren't too nice with everyone who was not human and all. So when the Demon King arose, and he looked very non human at that, many of our tribe thought he'd be a good leader. He would liberate us all from the tyranny of man and such, or just give us some good ol' payback for some of the stuff we'd gone through."

The room stayed silent. The true nature of the Demon King had been a long matter of debate - all his surviving portraits were not exactly naturalistic, and it was hard to identify what species he'd belonged to. Most of the historians had assumed some kind of reptile or dinosaur, because of the green skin, but that was still a hotly debated topic.

"Bunch of bullshit, we found out later." continued Giran. "Piccolo was defeated in the end, and
those of our tribe that hadn't fought directly at his side and been executed or killed in battle just decided they'd rather not have to do anything with people like him any more. We lost almost as many to him than we lost to his opponent. The old bastard was a tyrant and a sadist, pure and simple. There are stories-

"That is all very interesting," interrupted General Liu, "but how is it relevant?"

"Sorry. Getting to that. So, a few months ago these guys shows up. Humans. Well armed, but no uniforms. They call themselves the Instruments. They start sweet talking us. They say they knew we had been loyal to their Master, and they hoped that some of that loyalty still survived. They buttered us up and told we were too strong to live a life of poverty in the mountains, that we ought to take what we have a right to from those weaker than us. And fuck's sake, some of my tribe even listened. We ask how did they know where to find us, they drop the name of a couple guys that had left years ago seeking fortune. They say they're in the same organisation."

"We cross-checked," intervened Black. "At least one of these people was indeed in the Red Ribbon, and a key command figure in the base with the largest concentrations of insurgents."

"But we did not know that at the time." continued the ptero. "Anyway, they want to rope us in in some war they want to fight. They say that their Master will return, and that he will reward those who supported him. And those who didn't, well, he would do what he usually did."

"But Piccolo is dead." intervened Pitt. "He's been for three centuries. How could he possibly return?"

"They say he's not." grumbled Giran. "That he's just imprisoned. That they can free him. Release him onto the world, and then he will be unstoppable."

The minister shook his head. "These are just stories, made up by what sounds like a sect of religious fanatics. Piccolo was nothing but an ordinary warlord. Sure, his fame was amplified to mythical levels, but are we really to believe-"  

"Yes." the King's voice trembled with a light shiver. "We are. I am sorry, minister, these truths are usually not known outside of the diaries of my ancestors that only the reigning King is allowed to read. But I have reason to believe Piccolo is indeed still alive, and imprisoned."

There was much murmuring all around. "But how would that be?" asked the minister. "Your Majesty, even if these texts are written by your ancestors, should we truly take at face value-"

"You do not need to listen to me alone." replied the monarch. "Because I believe we have with us someone who knows the story much better than me. Someone who was there to see the events with his own eyes."

He looked pointedly at master Muten. Following the King, many pairs of eyes turned to stare at him.

"Your Majesty." said the old man, calmly. "With all due respect, how did you know?"

"All in due time. First, your testimony."

"Very well."

The master rose up, hopped above the table by pivoting on his walking stick, then walked to the podium.
"As His Majesty seems to know, I am old enough to recall something of that time."

Master Muten spoke with a tone that sounded unusually serious to all who knew him. He seemed to have set all foolishness aside, and his voice really seemed heavy with the full weight of his years. As his story unfolded, the whispers of incredulity died down, and turned into attention. It was unsure what was more surreal, the tale they were hearing, or the idea that the King and the world's foremost martial arts expert had plotted together to make a fool out of everyone else.

"I was just a youngster, mind you. I was training under my old teacher, master Mutaito, together with a fellow student named Shen. When King Piccolo started his campaign of terror, we initially didn't think much of it. Wars happened all the time; lords squabbling among themselves, conquering lands, securing their eternal legacy that would inevitably die off at the next conquest. The foolishness of mankind. Master Mutaito warned us to stay out of it unless it was a matter of protecting the innocent; martial arts are not meant for supporting the ambition of men who think themselves Gods."

"It soon became hard to ignore, though. It was clear there was something unprecedented about this new lord. His viciousness was unparalleled. He exterminated entire cities in his wake. He needlessly tortured and slaughtered civilians, not even just when it suited him to send a message. He simply was cruel for cruelty's sake; he revelled in inflicting suffering. Such madmen are usually hoisted by their own folly, and their careers ended by a knife in the back. But not him, and that was what really alarmed master Mutaito. There were rumours that the new lord was also a powerful martial artist, one so strong no one could put him down. Feeling a responsibility towards the world and his art, the master told us to keep training on our own for two weeks, packed some food and clothes in a light bundle, and left, disguised, to go snoop around in the lands that had been conquered, and decide if something needed to be done."

"I beg you to believe me, Your Majesty, when I tell you that master Mutaito was a man of rare courage. He would have welcomed death itself with nothing but a bow and a smile. And yet, when he came back from that trip-" Muten's voice hesitated "-he was not the same. He sounded tired, his hands would tremble. Sometimes he would jump at nothing, or freeze for minutes at a time, and his sleep was troubled by nightmares. He refused to tell us anything that he'd seen. All he would say was that he had witnessed evil, and that he needed to eradicate it. He said that if he didn't do it, no one else could. That even for him, it would be almost impossible. He was perhaps as strong a fighter as I am now, and in the face of Piccolo, he believed he did not have anything but the slightest chance."

"We learned soon enough how right he was. After months that our master spent in meditation and training in a cave, during which we only saw him when he peered out for his most basic needs, we packed clothes, food and water and set out to find Piccolo. Shen was boisterous and bold, thinking there was no way this fighter no one had ever heard of could stand a chance against our master, but Mutaito was in a dark mood, and that made me feel uneasy. I too found his tales hard to believe, thought that maybe he had overestimated his opponent, and it would be over quickly. More of a foolish hope, perhaps. I think we all knew the truth, deep down, and were just trying to deny that it was a march towards death that we were walking."

"At the time, Piccolo did not hide. He had ousted the ruling king that sat in this capital, in the old palace that was before this one, on the same ground. On the rubble of that castle he had torn down with his bare hands he had built his throne, and here he sat. It seems fate, I guess, that I should tell the tale for the first time in the same place where it happened. Piccolo had soldiers and minions, but none served him as guards, such was his pride. He welcomed challengers, confident he could break their strength, their resolution, and finally their life. So, the duel between my Master and the demon that ruled the world started simply like that, by asking."

"All hope we held was destroyed in a matter of minutes. Piccolo was strong enough to not only
defeat our master, but to toy with him before. And he did it, for a long time, just because he enjoyed
seeing us despair and be humiliated. Strike after strike crashed ineffectively against his defence. He
parried only at the beginning, then he let Mutaito hit him without even dodging, laughing at the
weakness of his attacks. Shen lost all his confidence and cowered in front of him. He bowed and
pleaded Piccolo to spare his life, to take him as a pupil, all while praising his great strength. I knew
better than hoping that Piccolo would give in to such obvious adulation. I steeled myself, and
meditated, and prepared to die proudly fighting when my turn came."

"But Mutaito was not just a strong and just master; he was a man of cunning, when he needed to be.
Every blow he sent at the opponent had a purpose, even the seemingly futile ones that shattered
against his body. And that purpose had slowly been reached, a deception unfolding across a whole
fight, with his life on the line. He could not fake weakness, not against someone as strong as Piccolo;
he would get found out. He really did fight with all his might, and exhaust all his strength, and
convinced him that he had ran out of all tricks, all techniques. And when Piccolo was sure anything
he could throw would be harmless, Mutaito unfolded his most lethal secret, that he had developed
during his meditation."

"I do not know how the technique was born. I believe he was inspired by it by the utter rejection of
the evil he saw Piccolo perpetrate, and without such an inspiration, I do not think anyone could
reproduce it. It was called the Mafuuba, and when it hit Piccolo it did not harm him - it did not need
to do so. It was magic, not pure power, something I did not think you could master with martial arts
alone. Piccolo screamed and struggled as he was caught into a green vortex that seemed to shred his
very being into thin threads of energy. Master Mutaito told me, with great effort, to take one of the
canteens whose water we had drunk coming there, unplug it and leave it on the ground. I obeyed,
stolidly, without comprehending what I was seeing. Mutaito redirected the flow of green energy into
the canteen, rushed to plug it again, and trapped the demon. Then, his hand still holding the plug, he
exhaled his last breath. The toll of the energy he needed to spend for that technique was too high."

"I was unsure what to do with the canteen, other than it needed to be put away from the reach of all
who could want it. There still were many former servants of Piccolo around, and I was not confident
I could defend it from all of them. Shen left me too, ashamed and dishonored by what he'd done, and
I did not trust him anymore either. I decided the best prison was the one nobody knew the location
of, not even I, and swam far into the ocean to then toss the damned thing down above the deepest
abyss I could find, and where the currents were stronger. I do not believe any human being could
possibly recover it ever again. When a new King rose from the ashes - your ancestor, Your Majesty -
I told him some of what I had seen, though not all. Just enough to satisfy him that Piccolo was indeed
gone for good. And thus ended the ambition and folly of the Demon King."

There was a long silence at the end of the story, that only the King eventually broke. "Thank you,
master. You can go back to your seat."

"If what you say is true," said cautiously Zeeman, "however, then there should be no risk of Piccolo
being freed. Even if the technology today could be enough to go recover his container, finding it is
another matter. It would be like looking for a needle in a haystack. A dark haystack. I mean, in 300
years, the canteen could have been dragged into a subduction zone and-"

"Precisely my thoughts." Muten nodded. "It seems to me like it would take a supernatural
intervention just for that."

"That's the problem." said Giran. "They might just have that."

Most people seemed just confused at this, but Bulma had a terrible intuition. She extended a hand to
her father and grabbed his, squeezing it nervously. She was starting to see the scary way in which all
the pieces could fit.

"There are items called the Dragon Balls," explained the ptero. "Piccolo knew a lot about them, for some reason, and we all passed that story down since that time. Me and those of my generation, we didn't pay much attention to it - just a legend, we thought - until last September."

Bulma thought that sounded awfully familiar.

"The sky got dark. Like in the legends."

"Just a weather anomaly that-" intervened the Minister of Science.

"Then a streak of light crossed it, from east to west." continued Giran. "Like in the legends."

Goku, Bulma, and Pilaf all exchanged glances.

"And when we followed that streak and searched the area where it had landed, we found a small stone ball. Approximately the size to fit in a human palm, perfectly smooth. Like the legends say a Dragon Ball becomes after being used. The legends also say that the Dragon Balls are seven, and that if they're gathered, they can grant any wish. The people who came to visit us knew them too, and asked us if we had found of any of them, and good thing only me and a couple others knew, and we weren't about to tell them. Still, they found out anyway, and siced that bitch on me. The one who shot me, and the one who stole the Dragon Ball from me."

"This is absurd!" shouted Zeeman. "Magical items that grant any wishes? Including, are you impying, resurrecting the dead? And someone would have used them last September? Mister Giran, I believe we would know if someone had-"

"It has happened. And they can resurrect the dead."

The heads around the table all turned at the interruption to see Bulma, standing up from her seat, slightly trembling.

"I am living proof of that."

The story that followed was even more incredible for many of those present - anyone who had not witnessed it in person, at least - and an order of magnitude harder to accept than Muten's. But at this point, this seemed a meeting out of legends, and those who still were not used to dealing with that were quickly getting on speed. After all, the evidence mounted up, and Bulma Briefs had already earned a reputation during the last months for being surrounded by rather impossible things. Scepticism wasn't completely eradicated, more like suspended - there would be time to question all of this in block after the end. Here was one of the most brilliant scientists of the era, and a reliable government contractor for years, supporting his daughter in her wild claim to have died and come back. There ought to be something to that. Pointedly, she omitted mentioning any details of what she had experienced during that time, and no one asked for them. The matter was already surreal enough without it becoming outright metaphysical.

"The Dragon Balls are now undetectable," said Bulma, "but they will stop being so on September the 12th, at some point around midday - I can reconstruct the exact moment, I have a recording of the event with a timestamp. If the Instruments are after them, then at that point the hunt will be on. They will try to grab them, wherever they are, and get their wish."

"This is all very hard to believe, miss Bulma." intervened Commander Black. "But if it was true, it would put them at a serious disadvantage. You say the Balls disperse all around the world. Does that
mean they would need to reach areas that could be deep within enemy territory?"

"Yes, of course. Though I have never had a chance to check myself, the legends I read suggested they'd only spread on land. Which makes sense, had they fallen into the ocean they would have ended up lost forever by now."

"That's what our stories say too," confirmed Giran.

"Right. That sounds less than ideal for anyone." Black was thoughtful. "Your Majesty, if it is true that the insurgents are after these Dragon Balls, then knowing in advance when to be prepared for their attack and counteracting it would give us a significant advantage."

"I will not command the army to act on the basis of myths and legends!" snapped General Liu. "We will have our hands full already defending the population. Your Majesty, they could be in league with the enemy! This could be a trap!"

"I do not believe it so," said the King, "but I will not order you to risk your men's lives on the basis of so little to go by either. Commander Black, you asked for a chance for your army to have a place in this war. If you are so convinced, this appears to be it."

Bulma saw Black staring at her - studying her. She wondered if he was doubting too, how much he could believe her (admittedly incredible) word.

"When the time comes, we will take care of it." he said, finally.

"That's not nearly enough!," burst out Bulma, who had assisted to the exchange in increasing distress. "Your Majesty, this is not just any matter, it is the key to this entire conflict. If these people really want to bring back Piccolo, with the Dragon Balls, they can. The Commander said their forces are numerically inferior to the insurgents - if they are defeated..."

Black didn't say anything, and neither did anyone else, but she felt many hard stares fixated on her. It was like she was missing something obvious that had been left unsaid but that both parties understood perfectly.

Oh, of course. That's what they want. For both forces to whittle each other down to irrelevance, and then sweep in to clean up the leftovers. And Black is sticking with his part only in the hopes that sufficient sacrifices will buy the rest of his soldiers immunity.

If any soldiers will be left at all, that is.

"Your Majesty," she said, "you are making a mistake."

"Perhaps." the King thoughtfully pinched his moustache. "Miss Bulma, however, I invite you to think of the implications of what you told us instead. If I took your tale at face value, last year you went on a hunt to find magical objects of great power. What did you plan to do with them?"

"What?" the girl stuttered and flushed. "That is not your... I mean, Your Majesty, I don't see how that matters."

"Mmmh. Perhaps nothing nefarious, then." the dog chuckled. "But you should consider the consequences of that. With that power, you could have unseated me."

Pilaf gulped.

"You could have taken the throne for yourself. Or more simply, killed everyone. Just like that. It can
"I-I don't know if it can do that much!" blurted out Bulma. "Shenron has limits, I think. I would not have used them so irresponsibly, or for something evil! Once I found out if they worked, I planned to use them to do good, instead."

"Ah, yes. Doing good. Such an easy concept. For years, miss Bulma, I have reigned on this world, and tried to do good. Did I do good by letting the Red Ribbon roam and cause what little damage it did because I thought a war to suppress them would be much more bloody? Judging from what we face now, perhaps not. Wanting to do good is not enough to avoid doing evil. And the more the power, the more the potential for damage. Have you considered this, when you decided to take it into your hands?"

Bulma thought back to all her reconsidering of how to formulate the best wishes, though she had to admit, it never had gone much beyond the whole boyfriend thing back then. "Yes, Your Majesty. I have."

"So you say. But from our point of view, miss Bulma - why should we trust you with absolute power?"

The girl raised her chin and looked the other in the eyes. "With all due respect, Your Majesty," she said, "why should we trust you with it?"

Many gasped. Dr. Briefs had tried to jump from the chair and cover his daughter's mouth before she could commit what amounted to lèse-majesté, but he obviously wasn't fast enough. The King, however, did not seem offended. Just thoughtful.

"Indeed." he said. "I have Ministers and a Parliament, miss Bulma, but ultimately, in many matters, the last call is mine, the last chamber of discussion my own brain. Sometimes power is thrust onto us, and the best we can do is use it as well as we know to. Still, I hope you appreciate my conundrum. How would you feel about pretty much anyone else gathering the Dragon Balls and using them without your knowledge or consent?"

Bulma's voice lost a bit of the spunk from before. "Not - not that good, Your Majesty."

"Precisely. Perhaps you should have thought about that before unleashing this possibility on the world - but no, miss Bulma, it is not your fault, it seems others too were aware of this, and the technology had been developed in parallel by them. If anything, your knowledge may have just saved us from a disastrous sudden defeat."

"To my ministers and generals I say, I know you're incredulous. You're right to be, I would not expect anything else but suspicion from you at this stage. But I would like you to answer me, and everyone else too. Think in the assumption that this is all true. There is a Piccolo, trapped somewhere at the bottom of the ocean. There are Dragon Balls that can summon him back into this world. There are people who know about both these things, and want him back. What is our best course of action?"

"Squash them immediately," replied Zeeman, without hesitating, "if we knew all of that for sure, then we should take no risks at all."

"True, but unfortunately, we do not know for sure, and General Liu already excluded that possibility." observed the King.

"I stand by that." replied the General. "But in this working hypothesis, I would say - build up our
defences. We need to do that anyway. Prepare our cities, both to face enemy soldiers, and to face Piccolo, if it comes down to that. And then prevent them from getting these Dragon Balls. They want to gather them, while all we want is to stop them from gathering them. We can use that."

"You can't *prepare* to face Piccolo!" shouted Muten, jumping up from his seat. "I have seen him - no ordinary weapon could stop him!"

"But we do not need to rely on *ordinary* weapons." said Dr. Briefs, suddenly. "Master, I respect your authority on the matter, but my daughter has made incredible progress in studying spiritual power these last months, and I have not lagged too far behind. I have spent a lot of time considering how one could defend themselves from the danger that people as strong as you could pose. I believe if we pool our knowledge together and work with the rest of the engineers at Capsule Corporation we can provide His Majesty's government with an effective plan to fortify our cities."

"I would be happy with that," said the King, "but I thought Capsule Corporation did not deal in weapons?"

"We have never done it," confirmed Dr. Briefs. "But this seems a special circumstance."

Muten shook his head, mumbling about the foolishness of men who overestimate their power.

"If you allow me, Your Majesty," spoke Commander Black, "your forces may well focus on defence. What remains of the Red Ribbon can take care of the offence, namely, of securing the Dragon Balls as soon as it is possible. To that effect, I hope Capsule Corporation will support us with their technology."

"We can do more than that." said Bulma. "Well, it's not in their contract, but I can ask the fighters on our payroll what do they think about giving a hand. Yamcha in particular has a bit of a heroic streak, lately, so-"

"I will help too," said Muten. "I owe it to my master to see that his sacrifice was not in vain. You seem to be deluding yourself that Piccolo may be stopped, but preventing his return is what we must put all our efforts into."

"So will we!" Pilaf jumped up from his chair, speaking for the first time since the beginning. "I mean, the Ox King has no love for the Red Ribbon, but we have a bone to pick with these 'Instruments'. And their master dethroned my ancestor!"

"That sounds good." Black nodded, pleased. "With your help, I am much more confident that we can win. After all, our win condition is simply to secure at least one Dragon Ball, and defend it from further attacks. As long as we can do that-"

"Then we should destroy it."

There was a long silence. The clear, young voice had raised, uninvited and unexpected, stunning all. Then finally someone reacted.

"Goku," hissed Bulma, fixing the boy with eyes too incredulous to even look angry, "what the heck are you saying?"

"We should destroy it." repeated Goku, looking back without flinching. "You heard the story. If Piccolo is that dangerous, we can absolutely not allow him to be released. The safest way is to destroy the first Dragon Ball we lay our hands on. You should all realise that."
"But - we'd lose the chance to use them!" shouted back the girl, ignoring all etiquette and protocol for the circumstance. "Ever again!"

"It would not matter, if we were all killed by Piccolo."

"He may not be invincible! Goku, you could beat him for all we know! We want to avoid him being freed of course but-"

"I am happy that you trust in me so much but..." the kid shook his head "...I can't be sure. Maybe, and with time to train before. I would not bet the world on it. Bulma, I know you have plans, but you promised me I could do what I wanted with the Dragon Balls next time. Well, this is what I want. The four-star Dragon Ball at least is mine, and I want to destroy it."

Bulma stuttered, unable to find the right words. Sure, Goku's reasoning was perfectly sensible, but there was such a thing as playing it too safe. The risk was enormous, but so was the reward he was willing to just throw away.

"For what it counts," intervened Muten, "I think I may agree with the boy."

She panicked. There must be something she could say to stop the discussion going down this ruinous road, anything, it couldn't possibly end like this, the most wondrous items of all time just lost forever for such a stupid reason...

"That will not do." said Commander Black. "If the information we have is right, then Piccolo could still be freed by conventional means. It is simply a matter of finding the canteen he is imprisoned in. Am I right?"

Bulma sighed in relief.

"Yes," admitted Goku, hesitant. "But the minister said it's almost impossible."

"It's almost impossible now," replied the Commander. "When Muten originally tossed the canteen in the ocean, it was impossible to either find it or recover it. Now we could recover it, with a submarine, if only we knew where it is. Who's to say that tomorrow it won't become possible to track it too? In fact, who's to say that the Instruments want to use the Dragon Balls for that purpose at all? All we have is speculation. Maybe the canteen can be tracked by following a signal, like the Dragon Balls, and they know even though we don't."

Begrudgingly, Goku nodded.

"So the Dragon Balls remain, if anything, our best weapon." continued the other. "If Piccolo were to be freed nevertheless in the future, and no one could defeat him, their power might be just what saves us. Besides all the other uses they have."

"If they are as wondrous as you say, I guess you may have a chance." agreed Muten, thoughtful.

"And!" added Bulma, hopeful, now that she saw a crack in Goku's reasoning. "Whatever damage the war that will break out causes, the Dragon Balls might be used afterwards to fix it. Or we may use them to get rid of Piccolo forever so that the risk never arises any more."

The boy shook his head. "I accept that you may be right. I won't destroy my Dragon Ball right away, if I get it. But if it comes to a situation where it's about to be stolen or captured-"

"I understand." said Black. "I agree with you that it would then be the only sensible move. But we should still have time. In fact, putting the retrieved Dragon Balls in a container rigged to destroy them
if forced by unauthorised people sounds like a tactic we should consider. For more than one reason.”

Bulma sighed in relief. Well, that the mere thought of destroying the Dragon Balls had been entertained was disturbing enough for her, but at least the damage had been controlled. She wondered if this was just about those arguments, or a little gesture on Black's part to earn her trust. A show of alliance.

After a while and some more back-and-forth about tactics and other details, the meeting broke up in a mix of individual conversations. Goku, Bulma noticed, had run up to Muten, and was asking someone, to which the old master - and molester, she wasn't about to let that slide - seemed to reply with unusual enthusiasm. On the other side of the screens, wherever that was, most of the ministers too seemed to be arguing over something. She took the chance to imitate them and slid next to Commander Black.

"Thank you very much." she said, sitting next to him. "I'm sorry for that - Goku can be a bit..."

"I wouldn't have said that if I did not believe it." replied Black, waving a hand. "I think Goku had a point; he just did not think all the consequences through. Did you not consider the option?"

Bulma shook her head. "I have no intention to let these criminals take away from us any more than they already have. And the Dragon Balls would be a price higher than anything they've done yet."

"They've killed people, miss Bulma." said the man, with a dry smile. "I thought you cared a lot about that."

"Which is why I would rather not lose the only thing that could bring them back." replied the girl. "I do not like settling just for cutting my losses. I need those Dragon Balls."

Black considered her for a moment. "There is someone I should introduce you to," he said, finally. "You would get along like a lab on fire."

Bulma was puzzled. "Wouldn't you usually say a house?"

"Usually, yes." the other chuckled. "I think I will get a chance anyway. Your company is to be involved with the defence already. But given our disadvantage, I would hope you could also support us, and have a more... active role?"

"Are you suggesting," asked Bulma, carefully, "that I could have access to your research facilities?"

"That is what I had in mind, yes."

After Capsule Corporation, the Red Ribbon was probably the richest private organization in the world. In fact, given that most of their activities weren't exactly squeaky clean, the matter of who had the most capital at their disposition had never been entirely settled. Bulma felt a jolt of energy at the thought of just how much there could be to see and learn if she could have access to their laboratories...

"What's the catch?" she asked, suspicious.

"Nothing in particular, if you can trust me." Black shrugged. "I just would like to get as much as possible done before September, if it can give us an edge against these enemies."

Yeah, she wasn't still fully convinced. But it was tempting. "You've seen what I have been researching. It's dangerous stuff, and I'm not willing to just disclose everything to you guys. You realise this has the potential to revolutionise the way wars are fought altogether. Make your whole
armory obsolete."

"You think I may resent you for it?" the man shook his head. "Miss Bulma, soldiers and scientists aren't that different in this respect. Change is not something that can be avoided; it is a part of our jobs. Change in tactics, in technology, in political landscape. You don't achieve victory by denying change, but by embracing it faster than anyone else."

"So you don't deny you're trying to get some benefits out of my research?"

"As you would be trying to get some out of ours." Black replied. "And the world as whole hopefully can benefit from both."

Bulma paused for a long while.

"You have a deal." she said finally. "Though if I can avoid it, I'm not getting anywhere near a battlefield."

"I surely wasn't thinking of that. I doubt your father would agree anyway." said Black. "Though in my opinion, you would do quite well on one of those."

That was the strangest compliment Bulma had ever received - but in the end, it still was a compliment, and she acknowledged it with a light smile.

"My father will be hard to convince about this already." she sighed. "But hopefully we can work something out."

The conversations all came to a head when the King called the room to order.

"One moment of your attention, please."

Silence returned in the meeting. All heads turned to the main screen.

"I will say a few words before excusing you all. There is still much too discuss, way too much for a single encounter, but that can be done among those who are interested in the next days and weeks. A lot of work awaits us, and perhaps pain; though I have hope that we can avert the worst. And it is to share with you the reason for that hope that I call to you now."

"I do not know what you believe about the world, and whether it has a purpose or a guiding hand. I am sure you all must have your own ideas. Miss Bulma claims to have seen death and come back; perhaps she knows more than all of us in this matter."

There were some light chuckles, which quite annoyed Bulma because what had been taken as a joke by some of the others definitely wasn't to her.

"But I can tell you something, now, that I have seen and heard enough to not feel foolish doing so. After yesterday's events, this meeting would have been held regardless, obviously. But yesterday night, during the few hours of sleep I could get after the situation had calmed down, I had a dream. A confusing, yet strangely vivid dream, in which I sat at a table, talking about what had just happened with many people, some of whom I had only glimpsed."

"A brilliant scientist and his daughter."

Dr. Briefs and Bulma exchanged looks.

"A would be king with a blue skin from a once noble family."
Pilaf made a choked sound, the outrage for having his family considered only once noble and that for being so underestimated by the King whose throne he wished to usurp perfectly annihilating into complete bafflement.

"A lone warrior from a proud tribe."

Giran nodded with a grim look. He seemed suddenly lost in thought.

"A master of martial arts."

Master Muten remained inscrutable, his ever present sunglasses hiding all emotion.

"The commander of a mercenary army."

Commander Black was unperturbed.

"And a young boy with a monkey tail."

Goku acknowledged with a polite nod and sat down.

"And you all have brought here precious knowledge, strategy, advice, and aid. It may be a coincidence, and these just the ramblings of an old dog. But I do not believe it so. I think a hand has pointed you all to me, and I am glad I followed its advice. I trust that such a hand will not let us fall under the blows of our enemies, however powerful. Today may be remembered as the day in which a war started. Together, let us end it. You are dismissed."

"Man, that was looong!"

Leaving the room, Bulma stretched and yawned loudly. Next to her, her father seemed already lost in some kind of mental calculation. Goku trotted right to her side.

"Bulma, I'm sorry for earlier," he said, "but I thought that-"

"You can be such a worrywart," she replied shaking her head. "You would destroy the chance at infinite future miracles just to take a slightly smaller risk now? Seriously..."

"Well..." Goku trailed off. "But it's the world at stake if we lose."

Bulma scoffed. "We won't. No goddamn way. You could probably beat all these guys up on your own!"

She noticed Commander Black walking towards them, and realised the time had come to work her charm on her father. He had to agree. She had already started fantasizing about what kind of incredible technology she could concoct by joining forces with the Ribbon's scientists. Honestly, the robotic arm that Mai had dropped at the Tournament had her completely stumped for how incredibly sophisticated it was.

"Dr. Briefs?"

"Dad, he's talking with you." Bulma tugged at her father's arm three times before he finally quit his trance and raised his eyes to meet those of the massive man towering over him.

"Commander Black," he acknowledged, blankly.

"I know you are easy to contact," said Black, "but the same can not be said for me. Please take this."
He handed a small business card, completely empty except for a single phone number.

"It's a safe line. *Personal.* And we change the number every month." he explained. "We should coordinate our efforts if we are to succeed."

"Hm, thanks, thanks." the doctor nodded and stuffed the card deep in one of his pockets. "I am sure we can manage. But if the occasion arises-"

"I would also like your daughter to come over to visit our headquarters soon." added the Commander. "I think there is much both we and she could learn."

Bulma drew her breath.

Dr. Briefs' expression turned sour. "Your headquarters." he said, in a resentful voice. "You mean your den of cutthroats."

"Dad!" snapped the girl. "He saved my life!"

Her father looked at her, then at the man, then sighed and shook his head. "Well." he said. "Thank you, Mr. Black. Really. I apologise for being rude. But what you ask me is nevertheless something I would never agree to in normal circumstances. We have never worked to develop weapons; we will do now only because of the gravity of the situation. From that to helping the Red Ribbon-"

"You have heard me talk earlier, doctor." said Black gravely. "The Red Ribbon is finished. It will not exist for long. Our last enterprise will be the same as yours - to win the war ahead. Don't see it as helping us. It is helping you, and I trust it will be a great learning experience for your daughter. And, well, our science division personnel will need somewhere to go after our organisation is dissolved. So this may double down as a recruitment rally for you."

"Let me finish." Dr. Briefs replied, with a voice that now sounded just tired. "I said I would never agree in normal circumstances. But these are not normal circumstances. Just earlier I have been... ordered... by His Majesty to give you as much assistance as you needed, and that my daughter ought to be involved in the defence efforts. Apparently, young or not, you're too precious a resource to be wasted on the sidelines."

Bulma smiled at that acknowledgement, before the full meaning of it hit her. *Ordered.*

It still felt good to know she was going to get what she wanted, but the feeling was slightly spoiled by the awareness that it was not her or her father's choice at all.

"Therefore, I think this is the safer it's going to get for her. But one of our warriors has to agree to escorting her as a bodyguard. And we expect you of course to reciprocate any information we share. If I get the impression all you are doing is leeching off our discoveries through her, the deal is off. I am all for the open exchange of ideas in science, but not with private mercenary armies."

"Naturally." Commander Black nodded. "I have agreed as much with your daughter already."

"Bulma, I will also run all the knowledge you are going to disclose through my own judgement. If something is to stay secret, you will not talk about it, no matter how exciting or fun the science that would result."

"Of course!" the girl smiled. She could take a little reasonable restrictions; it would take a lot to completely ruin her mood now. "You don't need to worry!"

"And it goes without saying that nothing of this will happen before your school finals. You have
already wasted a lot of time."

"..."

"Your finals that I am sure you remember about. As you promised, when you started this whole research program, that you would definitely give it your all to your studies even if you stopped attending school, and **definitely** not forget that school exists altogether due to being swept up in all this other stuff."

"..."

"You know, this is precisely why I usually activate the environmental recording system at home when I'm about to have a serious talk with you. I am sure when I go back home I can dig out the audio file with your *exact words* when-"

"AAAAAAUUUUGHHH!"

Chapter End Notes

Another long wait! I've been on holiday, and for a while, completely without internet, which meant I couldn't post this chapter even when the next one was ready. Good news is, at this point I'm already midway through writing chapter 26, so hopefully the next wait will be shorter. This was a pretty long and pretty exposition-laden chapter (as its namesake from LotR is after all...). Next one will be a bit of a breather, and then the real action begins. Thanks for reading and reviewing!
The summer of our discontent

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: the idea and characters of Dragon Ball are owned by Akira Toriyama. This is a simple non-profit fan parody.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter 25 - The summer of our discontent

On the first day of summer, in the early afternoon, under a white hot sun, in a dry, scorching air, Bulma finally walked out of her school for the last time. And she was not happy.

It was hot. She was tired from the few weeks in which she'd crammed all the study she had not gotten in months, and from the hours she had just spent answering questions both in writing and in speech. All around her she could see at the horizon new towers rising against West City's skyline, still mostly barebone structures surrounded by struts - the skeleton of the new defence system that her father was designing and building in collaboration with the RDF. Going through boring drudgery while much more interesting and important things were going on all around her - that had been her whole life since her meeting with the King. And then there was the matter of her final vote.

Her parents and Goku were waiting for her in front of the place.

How would she tell them? Where would she even begin? Should she try the self-loathing route? Laugh it off? Play the pity card, by bringing up her traumatic experiences, and how rattled she'd been about the whole 'a terrorist group is trying to bring back a demon lord who once almost destroyed the world' affair? She was ridiculously frustrated and angry, and the worst thing was, she didn't even know with whom.

Her mom smiled, expectant, waiting for her to break the silence and say something.

"To begin with," blurted out Bulma, "who the heck even remembers the 45th Fragment of the poet Yin Li by heart?"

"The same Sun that rises never sets,

and the one which sets never rises again.

The cicada sheds its skin,

the river flows with new water,

every spring is the first of its kind,

and each summer the last."
There was a long, stunned silence from all those present, their faces turned towards the impromptu reciter.

"Thanks, Goku," said Bulma, finally. "That really improved the mood."

"It was in one of the books grandpa brought me." explained the boy. "I liked reading it, I thought it was relaxing. But now that I think about it, perhaps not very cheerful."

Dr. Briefs jumped in, taking his daughter under his arm. "Oh, never mind that, I know you're not one for classical poetry, I was not counting on you doing all that well in literature. But how did everything else go?"

Bulma muttered something incomprehensible.

"I'm sorry...?" he asked, as everyone leaned in closer to listen.

Because that made it so much easier for her, right?

"B+," finally managed to say Bulma. "My final grade is a freaking B+ ."

Her father frowned slightly, but under his moustache you could tell he was about to chuckle. Her mother immediately seemed just too emotional about the whole 'my daughter graduated from high school' milestone to care about the minutiae. And Goku obviously had never known or cared about grades once in his life.

"I got everything perfect in math, physics and chemistry - of course! But literature was a disaster, and, and," Bulma drew her breath, "and history wasn't that good, I didn't remember a lot of the really old stuff, then I got into a spat with the teacher about Piccolo's war of all things, can you imagine, because I said he was a real warlord while the book says he's probably just an amalgam figure mixing traits from two different people who lived around the same time..."

"Well, we knew it wouldn't be your best grade." said her father. "You had way too little time to study too much. But what's done is done. Now it's over, and you can look ahead."

Bulma pushed him away. "But I sucked! I was bad and now I'm pissed because after skipping one year in primary and always being top of the class and getting to graduate at sixteen I still got this sucky grade which is really lame and I will never get the chance to fix it again!"

"Why do you care so much?" asked Goku, candidly. "You almost forgot completely about this until less than two months ago."

"I don't know!" shouted Bulma. "It just pisses me off."

Dr. Brief smiled. "I'm sure you'll get over it. There's an easy way to begin doing that, right?"

"Sure." muttered the girl. "I'll blow it off with C4."

C4, or how the official name went in full, the Capsule Corporation Camping Carousal, was the recreational event planned for the next day for all members of the Human Enhancement Program - a full day of sports, swimming, barbecuing, sunbathing, and generally all sorts of frolicking in the pleasant weather of West City's summer. It had been proposed, of all things, by Bulma herself, though she did not have much time for its organisation and left that mostly to her mother. The once-
in-a-century event of Bulma suggesting that both she and other people take some time off and just blow off some steam on fun nonsense was enough to get her parents worried about her health, but truth was, the reason for it wasn't too hard to understand. It was unspoken, because she would not say and the others would not ask. But the day after the camping Goku had planned to leave to go train with Master Muten, who had accepted him as pupil at the end of the King's council. Two days after, Bulma, Yamcha, Bandages and Spike would all leave for Red Ribbon HQ, to prepare for the upcoming war. And they would not meet again until the day would come to fight that war, and win it, because losing wasn't an option for them or the world.

And so, on the last day of peace, they all agreed that the best thing was to go with her idea, and pack as much fun in twenty-four hours as was humanly possible.

"Comin' by with the drinks!"

West City was not a maritime city, but the sea was not far. Sandwiched between the westmost periphery of the city and the ocean there was a thin green belt, with plenty of great spots for camping out and picnics. That was the area they’d decided to settle on, close enough to the beachline that they could walk there for a swim but still on the grass. Bandages showed up with a giant crate of beer and an equally massive cube of ice, followed by Spike with a barbecue and a full stack of boxes of ribs, steaks and sausages, and Yamcha with a dozen bags of drinks and snacks. Obviously, nothing of that was remotely necessary since they could just bring everything in capsules - which Bulma had done with the rest of the provisions and equipment, safely tucked away in a case no bigger than a purse.

"Look here!"

Bandages tossed his load in the air, then with one single fist shattered the ice in shards, which Fangs immediately jumped in to catch with a tub; and with another strike, the crate of beer was crushed too, and the single cans all fell lining themselves up straight into the ice.

"Will you stop showing off!" shouted Bulma. "Those cans will explode when you open them if you shake them that much!"

"Uh, guess that's true," the man scratched his head. "Well, not like you're having any, right? Miss underage."

"Uh, guess that's true," the man scratched his head. "Well, not like you're having any, right? Miss underage."

Which only earned him a stuck out tongue. "Well, not like you're having any, right? Miss underage."

Which only earned him a stuck out tongue, and then it was back to business for everyone, setting up the camp. Bulma had brought a massive capsule tent. She could have brought a whole house of course, but if you stayed inside a regular building, where was the camping part? Goku trotted behind her, the only one who hadn't carried anything, mostly because he had more sense than the others.

Bulma's parents came right after, amiably chatting and walking at their own pace, keeping their distance from the much rowdier bunch ahead. Panchy wore a light, fluttery summer dress, large brimmed straw hat and sunglasses. Dr. Briefs had ditched the lab coat and was wearing a shirt, which was pretty much the best one could expect from him in such circumstances.

Bulma recalled coming to this exact spot many times over many summers with them; it was a pretty easy way to just spend a summer day off. They could have afforded luxurious resorts in far more exotic locations, of course, but her father was almost never willing to leave the city or his work for that long. The place was almost exactly as she always remembered it, with one major exception. Over the entire area loomed the massive, towering shape of one of the outermost defence perimeter pylons currently under construction. The structure wove itself upwards right at the south east of there, and since it was still morning, the sun was right behind it, shining through the struts. Checkered by crossed bars, as if it was jailed, or all of them were.
"Betcha ya can't light the barbecue up with just your spiritual energy, Yamcha!"

"I'll take that on! What are we betting?"

"Well, if you can do it, I'll leave you half of my ribs."

"Great! Ok, then if I can't, you can have my share of beer."

"That's talking! I'm game."

"He's still underage too, Bandages, don't you remember? He's got no share of beer."

"Wait, what? Damn you, you tricked me! You-"

The barbecue had flared up and died down, and now the smoking hot embers were ready to be used. Yamcha promised to handle the cooking with the years of expertise he'd gained living on his own in the desert and cooking what he hunted. He picked the cuts of meat, slapped them on the barbecue, and sprinkled salt on them. As it turned out, that was pretty much it for his expertise. Not that much more was required anyway.

The meat started coming, as well as some veggies, courtesy of Goku, who wanted to properly balance the protein and fat. He advised others to do so too, earning mostly shrugs and a bad look from Bulma, as if he'd insinuated something terrible about her. They brought up dishes, spread blankets, and started sitting around and eating, passing around drinks and sauces, sometimes by spectacular throws that left most of the boys unfazed but gave Bulma the disturbing feeling of being caught across mortar crossfire.

Lunchtime had almost finished passing pleasantly when the trouble started.

Many groups of people had come and gone from the area during the morning - it was a popular picnic spot after all - but none quite as numerous as the one they were seeing now. A couple dozen people of all ages showed up, though conspicuously, for what looked like a very large family, they had no children with them. Their equipment also looked unusual. They carried poles and what looked like large blankets wrapped up in bundles, plus various other devices.

"Is that a megaphone?" asked Bulma, squinting to see better.

Her father put down the book he was reading and gave a look.

"Oh, I think I know what that's about." he said, with a slight frown. "Bulma, dear, you might want to ignore that. Guess someone recognised us and the news spread."

"Recognised us?"

The group started unfolding. They didn't put their blankets on the ground or pull out barbecues and such. Instead, they spread them out, propped them up with the wooden sticks, and raised them above their heads.

The banner read

OUR CITY IS NOT A FORTRESS! STOP CC MILITARISING WEST CITY
in massive, red painted letters. Out of the group stepped forward a girl, that looked more or less the same age as Bulma, with short, blonde air arranged in a pixie cut. She held up the megaphone and used it to start chanting, coordinating the other protesters, who joined her in a single chorus of "No weapons! / No wars! / Keep your guns off our shores!".

Bulma blinked a couple of times in disbelief.

"Dad." she only managed to say. "What ."

The doctor sighed. "I'm afraid there's been some issues with the populace after we started working on the defence project. I didn't bother you with this, but well - our PR team is handling it."

"But the new defences are supposed to protect them all! " she sputtered. "From Piccolo!"

"Yes, but it's not like they know that. The King didn't exactly make it public knowledge." Her father gave her a penetrating stare. "In fact, this is a good time to remember you that you're not supposed to talk about that , no matter how miffed you get."

Goku casually trotted to join them, while taking a bite from a large rib steak. "Why are they shouting?" he asked.

"Apparently, because they think those towers we're building to protect their lives are ugly." commented Bulma, acidic.

The boy raised his eyes, giving a long, appraising look at the pylon, a monster of steel and concrete looming over the entire area.

"...they're not wrong ." he decided.

"Oh, come on! Whose side are you on?"

The chorus stopped, and the blonde girl with the megaphone stepped even closer. Behind her, her companions stood, facing Bulma and the others, arms crossed.

"To the plutocrats of Capsule Corporation!" she shouted, only to be amplified even further by the megaphone. "We, the citizens of West City, will not stand by and watch as the military-industrial complex destroys our green for its opaque interests! We will resist, passively and actively if necessary! We will not be denied - we demand to be heard!"

"Yeah, we're hearing you alright." groaned Bulma.

"We will stand here as long as necessary. We will not leave until we are given a chance to talk with those who are responsible for this wanton destruction! Until then, expect no quarter, and expect no quiet! Everyone: no weapons! / No wars! / Keep your guns..."

And so the chanting resumed.

"What's that, boss?" Bandages came closer, cracking his knuckles. "Want me to help them disperse?"

"Goodness, no!" Dr. Briefs jumped up, scandalised. "Really, I'm just sorry about this whole affair. I sympathise with them - it feels almost nostalgic. Back in college, that could have been me. Do you remember the protest to keep the river clean where we first met, honey?"

Panchy sighed wistfully. "Of course I do, dear!" she chirped, lost in the mist of happy past memories.
"Though really, I only showed up because a friend of mine told me there were cute boys."

"And you found one!" chuckled the doctor, winking.

"Oh, you weren't one of the cute ones." replied Panchy, with a dismissive hand gesture. "But you were the one I was told to ask if I wanted to get something to smo-"

"Ok, time fucking out!" shouted Bulma, suddenly alarmed. "Dad, you're supposed to be a good example and all, you know?"

"Oh, those were different times," replied the doctor, shrugging. "That was that, and this is this."

"Sure, dad. So anyway, if you're such an environmentalist at heart, why don't you go talk to them like they're asking?"

Then, frowning suddenly, "And of course you're never supposed to do anything like that." he added.

Bulma rolled her eyes. "I'm not sure what I would say. I can't exactly talk about the real reason for all of this, and I understand well that without knowing that, how can I say it..." He raised his eyes at the tower. "It does looks a bit excessive."

"Alright." the girl crossed her arms. "So what you're saying is, we're supposed to let these people ruin our fun on the last day of quiet we have before we... before it's time to go back to work?"

"I'm saying we should find a way to be tactful, and maybe accept a bit of discomfort as part of our lot." he said, dejected. "And the most important thing is that we be mature about how we deal with this, and we don't instead react with some kind of childish tantrum which would only make matters wo-"

The explosions interrupted his speech and made him realise Bulma wasn't even listening any more. She'd stormed off and decapsulated four massive loudspeakers, taller than her and with subwoofers the size of her head. She connected a laptop to them and quickly browsed a music library before she found the perfect pick for the occasion.

The angry growling of a heavy metal vocalist, invoking death and murder over pretty much everyone other than him, exploded in the air at maximum volume, drowning completely the chanting from the protesters and shaking all presents down to their very bones. A few seismographers in the area registered the event.

"I promised today it would be fun." said Bulma, with a look of grim determination. "And if it's the last thing I do, fun is what we'll have."
"What?" he asked. "Deathkill are awesome."

"Anyway," continued Erasa, "there's another thing we can try if they keep it up. Did you bring stuff for the barbecue?"

The other frowned. "Your idea is to eat?"

"No, that's not it. We just need some aluminium foil..."

The sphere was forged of a titanium-vanadium alloy, diameter of fifty centimetres with a thickness of five. It had been made of two separate hemispherical halves, which had then been joined at the middle by arc welding. The rods, made of the same material, were cylinders one metre long and three centimetres in diameter.

"GATHER ROUND BOYS!" shouted Bulma, cheerfully. "I BROUGHT A PIÑATA!"

"A WHAT?" shouted back Yamcha, from a few steps away. "I CAN'T HEAR YOU!"

"A PIÑATA!" she repeated. "A CONTAINER YOU BREAK AND THERE'S CANDY INSIDE!"

DEATH! DEATH! KILL FOR THE THRONE! CRACK THE SKULL AND BREAK THE BONE!

"..." said Goku.

Bulma put a hand to her ear. "WHAT? SPEAK LOUDER, GOKU!" "WHY NOT JUST GIVE US THE CANDY?" he asked.

"THAT WOULD MISS THE POINT!" she replied. "BREAKING IT IS THE FUN PART!"

"THERE IS NOT MUCH FUN IN BREAKING THINGS ONCE YOU GET THE HANG OF IT, MISS BULMA!" commented Spike. "IT IS USUALLY UNCHALLENGING AND ABRUPTLY RESOLVED!"

"THIS ONE IS SPECIALLY MADE FOR YOU GUYS!" insisted Bulma. "IT'S GOING TO GIVE EVEN YOU A HARD TIME!"

DRINK THEIR BLOOD! LET 'EM GET IT! SLURP THEIR GUTS LIKE MOM'S SPAGHETTI!

"..."

"WHAT?"

"I SAID-"

"LOOK, I'LL JUST PUT IT UP HERE!" explained Bulma, trying to lift the metallic sphere. It didn't budge. "OK, YAMCHA, GIVE ME A HAND. JUST LIFT IT- HEY! STOP THAT!"

"STOP WHAT?"

"THAT!"

"WHAT THAT?"

"THE LIGHT!" shrieked the girl, exasperated. "STOP WHATEVER YOU'RE DOING WITH
THE LIGHT! IT'S ANNOYING!

"I'M NOT DOING ANYTHING!"

"SO WHAT IS THAT?"

She pointed in a direction, while trying to shield her eyes with the other hand. All gazes turned that way to see that some of the protesters, including their leader, had split from the main group and moved in a circle around. They held a large sheet of aluminium foil and were using to reflect the sunlight straight at Bulma, occasionally blinding her. When they realised they'd been noticed, the blonde girl grinned and waved a hand at them, then hit Bulma with the sunlight again.

"THAT'S CHEATING!" she shouted. "I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT THE RULES OF PROTESTING ARE BUT THAT CAN'T POSSIBLY BE ALLOWED!"

_CUT THEIR THROAT! STAB THEIR BACK! IF THEY BEG, DON'T GIVE A FU-

Suddenly, sweet, blissful silence came back, as the voice and instruments of Deathkill were muted. Everyone stood still, too busy regaining their bearing after the onslaught had finally ended. Some clutched their head among their hands and moaned.

"That's enough, I think." said Dr. Briefs, who was standing next to Bulma's laptop, and was now removing a pair of earplugs that he had worn for the entire ordeal. "Bulma, please, let's not escalate this even further. It's getting really silly. Perhaps we should just go."

"Never!" replied the girl. "I'm not going to yield to this sort of tactics! Today we're going to have _fun_!

"The way I see it, that ship's already sailed." grumbled Bandages.

"What if I go to talk to them?" suggested Goku. "I am not a representative of the company, but perhaps we can figure something out anyway."

"I'm not going to deign them of my attention, but you do whatever you like." replied Bulma, crossing her arms and scoffing. "Just remember not to mention anything that's under royal secret."

"And please be diplomatic." added Dr. Briefs. "The last thing we need is someone telling the newspaper that we tried to intimidate or threaten them."

Goku nodded, very serious. "Don't worry. I will just talk a bit and come back."

One hour later, the game of piñata had long finished, leaving behind only scrap metal ready to be recycle and a mound of sweets, candy bars, chocolates and such which were now being used as chips to bet on a game of poker. The game was completely dominated by See Through, who used his invisibility powers to achieve the best possible poker face - that is, no face at all. There had been much complaining, but in the end no one had managed to figure out a way in which this could possibly be violating the rules.

Goku finally came back, walking slowly, lost in thought.

"Hey, you're back, finally!" Bulma greeted him, while See Through dragged to his side a massive hoard of gelatines. "You took your sweet time! How did it go?"

"Did you know," asked the boy, with a worried look, "that this area is one of the few nesting zones
for the western bluejay?"

The other blinked. "No. Why?"

"Well, because the construction of the tower is disrupting the pattern of-"

"Oh, come on, seriously?" Bulma's jaw fell. "They convinced you?"

Goku thought about it a moment. "I wouldn't say that, no," he replied, seriously, "but I wonder what we could do to protect this vulnerable ecosystem."

"Oh, I don't know, maybe stop Piccolo from taking over the world?" she snapped. "Or do you think he'll have amazing environmental protection policies amidst all the murdering and general tyranting?"

"I don't think he would, but from the story we've heard, he's only interested in killing people." mused the boy. "So from the bluejays' perspective, his victory might actually be a positive outcome."

Bulma threw her hands in the air and just turned away, leaving Goku to chat with her father, who had come closer to hear what the fuss was about. The two immediately got into an enthusiastic brainstorming session discussing how one could go about relocating bluejay nests without upsetting their delicate equilibrium with the surrounding environment.

She went back to the game of poker. Yamcha was just dealing around a new hand.

"So how did it go?" he asked, handing Bulma her cards.

"About as well as you might expect," she said, shrugging. "He may be strong in a fight and smart and all, but Goku isn't exactly a cunning politician."

"Well, at least we got some quiet out of it." said Bandages. "They stopped all their chanting and blabbering while they were busy with him."

"You know what? You're right." Bulma was struck by a flash of inspiration. "That's it, that's their weakness! They can't resist the chance to try and proselytise, so all we need to do is keep throwing people at them. We'll just take turns, and we can probably drag this out until this evening anyway!"

"That's a nice idea," Yamcha said as he finished handing the cards, "but who would bite the bullet first?"

"Not me," mumbled Bandages. "I would end up losing my patience and smacking 'em."

"Nor me," chimed in Spike, "I'm afraid much like Bandages', my countenance might only result scary to those poor fellows."

"Nor me," said a voice coming from a bunch of cards floating mid-air above a bunch of empty clothes, "'cos I'm winning."

"It would need to be someone good looking, possibly already popular, a bit of a local celebrity, even..." said Bulma, counting on the fingers of her hand. "Someone known to care for the community... the kind of man that would make them want to really bring him to their side, and spend a lot of time doing so."

Yamcha raised a worried stare. "Why does that description sound so specific?"

"You know," Bulma flashed a charming smile, "that girl with the megaphone looks really cute."
He thought about it for a moment, then Yamcha put the cards down with a sigh and got up. "I've got to take one for the team, right?"

"Go get 'em," said the girl with a chuckle, then she focused back on her hand and its alluring three kings which she hoped could turn into a full house.

When Yamcha came back, he found the group had spread out. Bulma was leaning on a deckchair, reading a novel. Goku, Bandages and Spike were off on their own, and neither Fangs nor See Through were anywhere to be seen.

"Oh, there you are," Bulma raised her eyes from the book and checked her watch. "You earned us almost one hour and a half of quiet! Good job."

"You don't even ask me how it went?" replied the boy, grinning.

"Does it matter? It's not like I was hoping for anything other than some respite."

"I got a date!" announced the other, triumphantly.

Bulma eyed him sceptically.

"Well, if that's the case, congratulations." she concluded. "That was fast. Possibly a new record."

"Not for me." replied the other, smug. "But definitely in my five best times."

"Braggart."

There was a loud thud. The very ground under their foot shook with the force of a massive impact. Yamcha turned to look at the source, to see that it had been Goku, hitting Bandages from behind with a punch strong enough to push his feet into the ground.

"Yeah, that was Goku." said the mummy, without turning around. "Small hand, big punch."

"What are they doing?" asked Yamcha.

Bulma shook her head. "Playing a game in which someone hits another player from behind, and then the person who was hit has to guess who hit them. I swear, of all the boy things, this is the boyest I've ever seen."

"Sounds fun! I'll join them later. What about the other two?"

"Fangs is in a tent, says too much sun will burn his... delicate complexion." explained Bulma, flipping one page of her book. "See Through is somewhere sunbathing. Naked, because he wants a complete tan, and invisible, because he's embarrassed at being seen naked."

"Sunbathing while invisible?" Yamcha frowned. "Wait, does that-"

"No one told him. Hey, you never know, it's magic. It might work."

A minute passed. Yamcha kept eyeing Bulma, expectant, and Bulma kept blatantly ignoring him and reading her novel (the third volume of the popular 'Sharon Galactica' series, a saga about a space cop woman who spent equal parts of her time chasing intergalactic criminals and having flings with hot and passionate lovers).

"Ok," she said finally, closing her book with a sigh, "I'll entertain you - tell me about this date."
"I mean, it's not exactly a date per se..." started Yamcha.

Bulma raised her eyebrows. "You're not impressing me."

"I'm supposed to meet her next weekend, at this place where they all gather to discuss their course of action for the next protests, and-"

The other stopped him, lifting a hand. "So it's not a date. It's a meeting."

Yamcha lifted a finger in objection. "Well, yes." he finally admitted.

"Also, won't you be with us at Red Ribbon HQ next weekend?"

"I hoped to get the day off," replied the other. "I can run back to West City in a few hours. It's good exercise."

Far away in the distance, the chanting resumed. The protesters were nothing if not determined, Bulma had to give that to them, at least.

"Who should we send now?" asked Yamcha.

Bulma considered the options. Her father had expressly refused to go talk to them, and anyway he and her mother were both sleeping inside the tent right now. Of the others, there wasn't one she'd trust to either last more than ten minutes, not freak out the protesters completely, or not resort to violence. Bulma wasn't the best at handling public relations, but even she could see how sending a living mummy to strangle the leader of a protest group with his bandages was one of the things you usually didn't want to be associated with your company's image.

There was just one answer. She put the novel down and stretched her legs before jumping up from her deckchair.

"I think I'll go have a chat with them myself." she said.

So it finally came down to that. Bulma slowly marched across the field, eyes slightly squinted in the bright sun, fixated on her rival walking towards her from the other side. Behind each of them were their respective cohorts, looking expectantly, waiting to witness the result of that final clash that would decide the day. The meadow was too small for both of them, and they knew it.

"Whoever calls themselves the leader of this bunch, come forward!" shouted Bulma, standing in the middle of the open space, legs wide, arms crossed. "Whatever complaints you have, let me hear them and respond as they deserve."

The blonde girl had left her megaphone behind, and stood in front of the other with equal confidence. "My name is Erasa," she shouted back, "as you would know if you didn't think yourself too good to come to school with us commoners."

Bulma thought about a second. Yes, it was possible she'd actually seen that face at some point in her class...

"I represent the concerned citizens of West City who are worried by the recent activities of Capsule Corporation in collaboration with the Royal Defence Force."

"Concerned citizens?" asked Bulma, sarcastic. "West City has over seven million inhabitants. I don't see many of you here."
"Still more than there are of you, yet you get to decide for everyone else, apparently," replied Erasa, unfazed. "The new defence system being erected all around West City is an outrageous waste of taxpayers' money, a destructive attack on our environment, and an offence to the eyes. It also appears completely unjustified, save for the need to shuffle money from the public treasury to the pockets of the Briefs family."

The other sneered. "Let me get this straight. You think we're doing all this... because we're in cahoots with the King to make money?"

"Do you have a better explanation?"

"Oh, I don't know, how about protecting the city from the rogue terrorist organisation that has just sprung up?" snapped back Bulma, irritated.

"A rogue terrorist organisation like the Red Ribbon?" replied Erasa. "Which for example is suspected of having perpetrated the Pazu Village massacre in 724, during which there were more than twice the victims of the Tenkaichi incident."

"Ok, that's-"

"Or having provided weapons and manpower to the drug lords behind the eastern trade, which in ten years has led to more than fifty victims, two of them journalists who had snooped too much."

"Right, yes, but-"

"Or having assisted the coup in the city-state of Batora, which resulted in the government being overtaken by the faction that wanted to forgo independence in favour of joining the world kingdom. Technically all perfectly legal, of course, since it was foreign territory and a civil war - but thousands of dead. So, care to explain me what is so different now that these cutthroats have split in two and are killing each other for a change?"

That one of the two sides has the means and the will to unleash on the world the most dangerous being to ever walk this Earth, was the obvious answer, but Bulma couldn't exactly say as much. Besides, she knew the Red Ribbon didn't have a great fame, but she'd never researched their history much. Now suddenly she felt a bit more queasy about the prospect of visiting their main headquarters, and felt grateful that her father had set the condition that she ought to have a bodyguard.

"Alright," she said, carefully, "for the sake of argument, then - what would you think if, hypothetically, the King possessed information that you don't, and had good reason to think this faction poses a greater danger than the Red Ribbon either did?"

Erasa shrugged. "Why would they?"

"Because they're more fanatical, or more aggressive, or have acquired a secret weapon. What then?"

"Then he ought to share that information with all of us." replied the girl. "And we'd see why this stuff is so necessary. If he doesn't do it, why should we not suspect that he's got ulterior motives?"

"What if he can't?" pushed back Bulma. "What if sharing the information would in itself increase the danger?"

"Oh, that's so convenient." Erasa rolled her eyes. "Stay put, dear citizens! Trust us, dear citizens! We know what's best for you! Here's some vague soundbites about how dangerous these terrorists are, now get your whole city turned into a fucking fortress!"
She walked forward to Bulma, as her voice rose and her eyes lit up with anger.

"And what do you care? You get to stay sitting in your little complex, training superheroes or whatever, and your dad is all buddy with the King while our money pays for your company's profits! So pray tell me, what is this greater danger we should be aware of that justifies all of this?"

"I... I can't..." Bulma stammered. "That was just speculation!"

"Was it? You know, me and my family, we owned a house until February, when some giant monkey monster appeared out of nowhere and stomped it flat! And good thing we'd all had time to flee. Now my family's renting some cheap apartment in the city centre while that area is being rebuilt."

Bulma paled to this. She was glad Goku wasn't there to hear it.

"So is there really some greater danger? Is that monster going to return? Is there another? You know, I would rather prefer that this is just some corrupt scheme to make money than the alternative! Because what does the King know is coming that is so dangerous it requires that thing to be fought off? Maybe if we actually knew what awaits us we could agree that this is really the best way to defend ourselves!"

"Maybe the King didn't tell you," replied Bulma, piqued, "because he thought if he did you might not agree it is!"

"Yes, of course we might not! THAT'S THE WHOLE POINT OF TELLING US!"

Erasa's shout left Bulma dazed. She went back to talking more softly afterwards, but her voice was still a bit rough due to the effort, and her eyes still glaring.

"You're so rich and powerful, you don't understand how it feels, do you? To just- not have control over your life. You go on and then some kind of force from outside arrives and smashes your house, or hurts you, or builds a giant fucking tower on your favourite camping spot."

"And there's always someone more powerful that just sort of hangs above your head," continued Bulma, almost muttering to herself. "And you never know when they will be able to get you or why should it be fair that they have so much power over you - they just do."

Erasa looked at her with a slightly surprised gaze. "So you do understand, maybe."

Bulma didn't answer. "Look, I can tell you this much. I can't decide this stuff. But I can talk to my dad, and believe me or not, he's sympathetic to what you're saying. We can't stop building the tower, but it will probably have served its purpose by the end of this year. I think it's going to be easy then to convince the King to just have these torn down. We'll return the area to as close as possible as it was. And from the look of it my dad will probably come up with something for the bluejays too. That's the best I can do."

"Wait a second, are you serious?" Erasa frowned. "End of the year? Do you mean-"

She went pale.

"That soon?"

Bulma shrugged. "What soon? I don't know anything." she said, dismissive. "We'll have just built it and then torn it down. As you said-"
"-biggest waste of taxpayers' money ever."

The rest of the day passed in relative quiet - the protesters stopped chanting, though they continued their vigil and kept up their signs and banners. Bulma came back and didn't talk about what had been discussed - only reassuring her dad that she hadn't let out anything she was not supposed to. At one point, she, Goku and Yamcha went for a swim, or rather, the two boys did, and she was confined to trying to learn how to float while staying close to the beachline, since she'd never bothered until then. Goku went to great lengths to explain to her how really, swimming and summoning one's spiritual energy weren't that different; a lot of it relied on forgoing to some degree conscious control over one's body, and letting it just do its thing while relaxed. That similarity, Bulma suspected, was the main reason why she was so awful at both things.

When they came back it was already twilight, and they lit up the barbecue again for dinner. At that point the protest had been trickling away for a while, their numbers dwindling, and finally it dissolved entirely. A couple of the girls that had been there even happened to drift towards them and started chatting up Yamcha, who was all too eager to keep them company. One even reached out to Goku - and ended up lost with him in some long philosophical discussion about politics. Bulma tried asking where Erasa had gone, but she only received a shrug. Well, obviously she wouldn't hang around. Bulma's last quip had left the leader of the protest rather cold, if not straight up outraged, though she suspected not as much as she would have been if she didn't suspect there was more that was being left unsaid.

Finally, having ran out of food, the time came for the last activity of the evening. While Dr. Briefs and wife had already withdrawn inside the tent to sleep, Bulma set up a small open air cinema using capsules to conjure a screen, a projector, and the loudspeakers from before. There had been some discussion about what movie to watch, but in the end, the decision had been easy enough. A few weeks earlier, right after the Tournament had ended, Yamcha had been called up by a production company who asked him to sell the rights to his name and life story so that they could make a movie on him and his heroic exploits in West City. Yamcha had thought the initial sum was way too petty for him to consider, and refused, in the hope of haggling a bit and getting a better deal. The company instead had simply not called him again, and then, some time later, had released "City Warrior Yarcha", a completely original production for which any resemblance to real people or events was entirely accidental. This had seemed really funny to everyone except Yamcha himself. In the end, however, the company had the grace (or the cheek) of sending him at least a copy of the movie that they couldn't deny had drawn "some artistic inspiration" from his real life actions. And so Yamcha had to settle for the fact that, at least, he'd gained some indirect publicity, and the movie for the C4's open air cinema night was found.

Bulma and Goku sat in the back, where the light of the screen was distant enough that everything around them was basically dark. Goku had sat next to Bulma; and Bulma had sat next to one of the vats that still had some cans of beer left, now sunk in a sea of warm water left by the long melted ice. Since no one could see her and everyone was focused on the movie, she could easily get away with grabbing a few. She popped a can and took a sip right as the movie was beginning.

The movie was nothing if not pedestrian. Yarcha was a hapless softball player with extraordinary strength whom some obviously villainous team owners spurned, forcing him out of the league out of envy. There was much moustache-twirling. Poor Yarcha, kicked out, ended up wandering into the lab of a certain Purma, a busty scientist with a very determined attitude, who injected him with a Hero Serum which multiplied his already amazing strength and transformed him into a defender of justice. Bulma didn't know whether she should be flattered at the fact that they'd picked such a sexy actress to interpret her off-brand alter-ego, or pissed at the fact that she was blatantly acting as a love interest for Yarcha. In doubt, she opened another can of beer.
The plot thickened. After having averted a few petty crimes, Yarcha got involved in a greater conspiracy that threatened the whole world. Apparently, some of the team managers who had kicked him out were in fact aliens, hellbent on subjugating the Earth. Bulma wondered if she should apologize to Goku on her planet's behalf for its backwards sensibilities about extraplanetary lifeforms, but he didn't seem to mind much. Anyway, the managers now wanted to gain some leverage over the hero, and so decided to kidnap Purma, in order to blackmail him into doing their bidding. But they had underestimated Purma's pluckiness and bravery - when the hitmen showed up at her home, she pulled out a hidden gun, and took them down at the end of a spectacular gunfight. Bulma winced, and took a third can of beer.

"I thought you weren't supposed to drink that." said Goku, finally noticing, having until then been unreasonably gripped by the terrible movie.

Bulma looked at him with the hazy, unfocused gaze of a sixteen year old girl who'd already downed two full cans of beer. "Want a swig?" she suggested finally, with a malicious grin, pushing her can towards him.

"I though I wasn't supposed either." he replied, unsure. "Isn't it unhealthy?"

"Oh, who knows. Maybe you got some amaaazing alien metabolism." she said, chuckling. "Come on, try it! Dad's asleep anyway, he can't complain."

"I'm not getting bribed." pointed out Goku, extending his hand. "But I am a bit curious."

"That's the spirit! Go for it."

The kid picked up the beer can, brought it to his lips, and drank a bit.

"Eeeeeeuggghhh." was his immediate reaction, and Bulma had to grab the can before it fell on the ground. She laughed.

"That's so bitter." said Goku, after finishing sputtering. "Why do you even drink that ?"

"You get used to it." she replied, taking another sip.

Goku shook his head. "Why are you not supposed to drink it? Besides the terrible taste."

Bulma shrugged. "Because it's unhealthy, mostly. Or maybe it's just because it makes you think less about the future and be even less responsible than usual and imagine what that means for me. "

She giggled again.

"That doesn't sound good." said Goku.

"Haven't you noticed? I'm not a good girl." replied Bulma, her expression suddenly gloomy. "I drink beer, and I don't study and get B+ at my finals, and I... I act like a stuck up bitch sometimes, and I'm selfish-"

She paused a bit, sullen.

"And I'm a murderer."

Goku frowned. "What are you talking about? You're not-"

"I didn't tell anyone." she interrupted him. "But on the day of the Tournament I killed someone. One
of those terrorists. Only Commander Black saw me. It's just - it was self-defence, okay? Tooootally justified. So I don't know why I keep... keep remembering it."

She shook her head.

"Totally justified. But it was, you know. The part that really gets me. It was like, I didn't even realise it, okay? I didn't think about it. I just reacted, and then, bang, he's dead. His eyes went all, all blank and stuff."

There were shivers running through her body. She downed the rest of the beer in a single gulp.

"And the part that really, really gets me is, he must have gone... there. He wasn't a good guy. So I sent him to Hell. With my hands. I keep thinking I did that, and well, I guess one day I'll have an eternity to apologise to him, yeah?"

"It wasn't you who sent him there," said Goku. "It was Enma."

"You said your grandpa told you the Gods are more like forces of nature than people with a free will," replied Bulma. "So it was really me making the choice."

The boy shook his head. "It really wasn't. And whatever you did, he would have ended there eventually if he didn't change his ways."

"Maybe."

She tossed the empty can, and Goku grabbed it before it landed on the grass. "I don't believe either is a very serious sin," he said, serious, "but as far as that stuff goes, I think littering is worse than drinking when you're not supposed to."

Bulma laughed and nodded.

"Goku, I'm sorry." she said finally. "For the King's meeting, I mean. You suggested to destroy the Dragon Balls, and you were right, that may actually be the best thing to stop Piccolo from coming back if the situation is desperate. I made up a lot of reasons why it wasn't a good idea, but the truth is, I just could not give up the idea that perhaps, perhaps if I could use them again and again, I could find a way to change it all. To make it better. And I didn't want to let that go. I'm just that selfish, right? To risk getting the whole world killed just because I'm afraid for myself."

The boy thought about it for a while.

"No, I don't think you're all that wrong," he said, finally, slowly. "If everyone got killed by Piccolo, they would still end in the afterlife and... wherever they get sent. I don't mean that what comes before doesn't matter," he added, hurriedly, "but in the end, what comes afterwards is permanent. Just protecting this world isn't enough to matter, in the long run. But I don't know if the Dragon Balls would be enough either. They must have limits, and what you'd be trying to do would be so incredible, that if you were able to, perhaps you wouldn't even need them any more."

"You might say I don't have a snowball's chance in Hell." Bulma chuckled. "But hey, one has to try, right? Tomorrow Piccolo's goons. Then Frieza. And then-"

She tossed her head back and pointed a finger at the sky. Not the stars, but the infinite blackness between them, receding forever into the distance.

"You're very confident." commented Goku.
"I'm very drunk." replied Bulma.

They'd missed most of the movie; it was now in its epilogue. Having beaten badly the evil alien conspirators, Yarcha was holding Purma with a single arm and bringing her closer, while she closed her eyes and pushed her lips forward. A rousing music underlined the triumph of good over evil and announced the imminent arrival of the end titles.

"That way it's easy." grumbled Bulma. "Just win once, and bam!, happiness ever after. Movie's over. But us, we're stuck here just having to do it again and again until we lose. Like your poet friend said - every summer the last."

"That's part of a lost poem, though," explained Goku. "It used to tell the story of a pupil seeking the teachings of a famous master. The 45th fragment is spoken by the pupil, complaining about the injustice of the world. The 46th comes from the answer of the master, who praises the virtues of the wise."

"Let's hear it."

"His eye embraces the whole world,

his heart is calm, his mind still,

his self fills the bowl like water,

he lives in the eternal summer."

The girl grinned.

"You're right. I like this ending better. But I'm not much of a wise woman, myself."

She grabbed her fourth can of beer, opened it and raised it in a toast.

"To this summer!" she shouted, to the sky, and the world, and a few very baffled people who were trying to watch the ending of the movie.

She took her first swig.

"May it last forever."

Chapter End Notes

Right, this was a bit of a breather chapter as I mentioned, and I was myself a bit melancholic while writing it, so my mood has certainly affected it. Still, I felt like it was necessary to give the characters a bit of time together to goof off, and I won't have any more chances to do that for a long time in the upcoming arc. Thanks for reading!
Chapter 26 - The strange case of Dr. Gero and Ms. Briefs

When Bulma woke up, her first thought was to run to her computer and check the outcome of the calculations she'd set it up to do the day before. She saw, with relief, that they had finished a few hours before, and when she ran a couple simulations to test the results, it looked like they were consistent with her expectations. She plugged a small box-like device she had readied on her desk to the computer, clicked another button to begin uploading the program on it, and went to have breakfast.

At breakfast the mood was slightly sour. Her mother greeted her with a lot of attentions and almost twice the usual amount of pancakes. Her father was already sitting at the table, reading up a technical report, with a frown on his face.

"Morning," mumbled Bulma, still in her pajamas and with an untamed bedhead.

"Good morning, my dear," he replied, folding quickly the report and trying to display a cheerful attitude. "Ready for the trip?"

"Mm-mmh, almost."

The girl sat at the table, poured herself a cup of coffee, and started stabbing pancakes with a fork.

Breakfast felt unusually lonely, because for the first time in almost one year now, Goku was not joining them for it. Well, he'd skipped it sometimes really, mostly to go train at 6 AM or something like that, but this was the first time it was because he just was not in the house at all. The day before, he had left for Kame Island, the residence of Muten Roshi, to begin training with him. Today, it would be Bulma's turn to leave.

"Is your luggage ready?" asked Panchy, worried. "Do you need anything?"

"...'ss all fine," replied Bulma. "Did you see Yamcha and the others?"

"They are already in gear." Dr. Briefs nodded, approvingly. "You know, those boys can be really sharp when they have to. I feel safer knowing that they'll be with you."

The girl shrugged. "It's not like there is any risk anyway. The Red Ribbon are our allies."

"Of course, of course. Our allies." Her father frowned. "Bulma, do I need to remind you that?"

"No." she snapped. "You don't need to remind me."
He backed down.

"I'm sorry." mumbled the girl. "Let's just have breakfast together, is what I'm saying."

"Of course. Want some syrup?"

The meal was finished, and Bulma jumped up and ran upstairs to shower and dress herself. The plan was to all leave in an hour, and there would be time for proper farewells once she was ready.

After her shower, wrapped in a towel and with a smaller one around her wet hair, Bulma went back to check her computer. The upload operation had succeeded. She unplugged the small device from the machine, then finished doing her hair with a hairdryer and a brush. Once she was ready and wearing her underwear, and before putting on anything else, she picked it up again and considered it.

The device was an electrostimulator, of the same sort that months before had attracted Goku's attention and gave her the idea for her ki scanner, with some minor modifications. It could be used to apply low tension electric signals to one's body - just enough to induce a twitch and little more, in normal conditions. But this one, she had programmed with the data extrapolated from thousands of participants to the Tenkaichi Tournament, data she had obtained exactly for that purpose. The analysis, which she had already designed before obtaining the actual data, had indeed confirmed her original suspicion. Once correlated to the various observations, it had become clear that the amount of spiritual energy summoned by nervous stimulation was not proportional to the intensity of said stimulations, but rather a function of their shape. Bulma's broken arm had not been a random accident. Basing herself mostly off data acquired from Goku and Yamcha had meant she just didn't know how to call out an amount of ki truly proportional to her body's ability to withstand it. And so what she'd done before was tantamount to telling someone "please bludgeon me with a baseball bat" by whispering rather than shouting, and expecting the result to be less painful.

Now, she was pretty sure she would not make the same mistake. Pretty sure. Not sure enough by rigorous scientific standards, and certainly not sure enough to satisfy her father to the point he'd approve her experimenting on herself.

But she was about to walk straight into a shady mercenary organization's main centre of power, and for all that she was bringing bodyguards with her, Bulma would feel safer if she could also have, as a last resort, option the means to protect herself. All in all, she trusted her ability enough that she thought the risk of experimentation here was the lesser one.

She opened a drawer, took out a bundle of wires, fastened the stimulator to her back with an elastic belt, and started methodically sticking the electrodes to her body, taking care to make it so that the device could be easily concealed under the clothes she would wear for the day.

"Morning, students! Time for a bright new training day!"

Goku opened his eyes and was startled for the fraction of a second that took him to remember that indeed he was not sleeping any more in the small apartment that Bulma had arranged for him right next to Capsule Corporation's gym. Instead, he was inside a small rustic room, on a thin mat on the floor, and another kid's foot had stranded and found its way right on top of his chest. He pushed it away with one arm.

"Lemme go," mumbled Krilllin, turning around after his foot was moved.
"Wake up, you lazy bums!," shouted the same voice from before, this time slightly less patient, "Every minute you spend sleeping now is one minute less you have to eat your breakfast!"

This got both Goku and Krillin suddenly alert and on their feet. A few seconds later, they had their gis on. Krillin was running to reach the kitchen first, while Goku wasn't sure why that ought to be a competition in the first place.

"It's still dark," he noticed, sitting at the table.

"Well, duh!" Krillin rolled his eyes. "Training begins before dawn and ends late at night. That's how it's done in a serious school!"

Goku was about to start discussing the benefits of rest on the human body and how excessive stress and sleeplessness could in fact make a training regime less effective, but he decided against it. He wasn't always the most sensitive person, but even he had picked up on how much his new schoolmate hated hearing criticism against the master.

"Where's that lady who was helping yesterday?" asked Goku, looking around.

"Shewwy?," Krillin munched a large chunk of leftover cold meat he'd grabbed from the fridge. "Stiww sleeping. We don't need hew fow bweakfast anyway. Want a dwumstick?"

Goku nodded and grabbed the chicken leg, biting into it without much enthusiasm. He wondered if months spent living with the Briefs and eating at their table had somehow mollified his eating habits.

Master Roshi walked in a minute later.

"Well, I see you're all nice and ready," he said, cheerfully. "Today it's going to be a fun little day of training. Since Goku has joined us yesterday, I was thinking this was a good day to put you both to the test, so I can both measure Krillin's progress and decide where to start with our new friend."

Krillin's eyes sparkled. Tests meant more chances to shine in front of his master. He glanced at Goku.

"Don't worry if you won't pass," he whispered, with a patronising smile. "It's your first time."

"He didn't mention anything about passing at all," pointed out Goku.

"Come out as soon as you've finished eating!," said Muten. "We'll find a nice empty spot to run and lift and such. I'll go prepare myself, and when I come back, we can go."

"Master?," asked Goku, perplexed, "If you have to prepare yourself, why are you walking into Sherry's bedroom instead?"

Krillin threw a side glance at him and said nothing.

"Oh, oh, you're right." mumbled the old man. "How thoughtless of me. Well, well, here I go, this one's mine for sure-"

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Red Ribbon Headquarters wasn't just a military base. Bulma had expected something big, but none of her expectations could possibly match reality. As their jet flew above the complex, looking for the
landing platform it was scheduled to arrive at, Bulma, Yamcha, Bandages and Spike all looked out of the windows to see much more than a bunch of barracks, hangars, and military equipment.

Red Ribbon Headquarters was a proper city in all but name.

The military wasn't even the main part of it. The garrison of course was in itself an impressive force, more than 25,000 men between infantry, armour and artillery divisions, and aviation. But that many soldiers required almost twice as many civilian support personnel, such as mechanics, cooks, cleaners, and so on and so forth. The Red Ribbon officer that was piloting the plane, a lean, serious looking man in his forties that introduced himself as Sergeant Ashwood, explained that most of that support personnel wasn't officially enlisted in the Ribbon, but rather, were external contractors. However, they still lived on the premises. As did the families both of soldiers, especially high ranking officers, and contractors, and further personnel required to service them with shops, schools and medical services, bringing the total population of the base to something around 200,000 people.

The area where the jet landed was near the core of the entire complex. Right next to the platform was the massive building of Central Command, from which the Commander sent his orders to the army. Out of one of the side exits came Commander Black to greet them.

"Welcome to our Headquarters," he said, extending his hand. "I hope your trip has been pleasant?"

"As pleasant as a five hour flight can be." replied Bulma, grabbing and shaking his hand. "You have quite the impressive complex here."

"Our greatest pride. No other base comes even close to this size and complexity," explained Black, satisfied. "You will appreciate that even more, I am sure, once you get to see our R&D division."

"I'm eager to." Bulma gestured to the others, and casually, Yamcha walked up to her. "So, our plans for today...?"

"I was hoping to introduce you as soon as possible to our lead researcher," said the Commander. "As for your bodyguards, since they intend to help us in the upcoming conflict, we had some activities planned. Our tactical officers want to assess exactly their capabilities so they can plan for the best way to incorporate their help in our established manoeuvres, and I'm sure they will enjoy joining the troops for a few training exercises..."

"Doesn't sound very enjoyable to me." blurted out Bandages, brusquely. "We can probably fight better than a thousand of 'em already."

"But team efforts always mean more chances of victory," suggested Spike, trying to sound more conciliating, "and in these dire circumstances, we don't really want evil to gain any edge on us, do we?"

The other nodded curtly, but he still crossed his arms and frowned. Commander Black didn't let any displeasure show.

"Of course, your help is merely on a volunteer basis," he said, "so I can't force you. We're already grateful for it as is. And someone ought to stay with miss Bulma anyway, or the whole point of you being her bodyguards would be a bit moot, so if you want to be the one-"

"Listening to egghead talk's gotta be just as boring." replied the mummy. "But at least I won't have to take orders from you guys. I'll do that."

"Very well. Then those who decided to join the training, please follow Sergeant Ashwood. Miss Bulma and bodyguard, come with me. The main research complex is this way."
Krillin and Goku had to wait a few minutes, sitting idly in the middle of a field, while Muten searched for rocks. They'd already moved to a bigger island for their training, by swimming, and now their master had brought a massive boulder in front of them. Then he left to look for another one.

"Will we have to move here every day?" asked Goku, while squeezing the water out of his belt.

Krillin shook his head. "Well, we didn't now 'cos Sherry was still sleeping and she's really sensitive about not being woken up before 8 AM... like, really sensitive... but we'll probably just move house and all later today, or tomorrow. That's what he did with me." He grinned and took on a boastful air. "And guess what, I carried the house all by myself!"

"House and all...?" Goku frowned in puzzlement. "Oh. It's a capsule?"

The other kid clicked his tongue, disappointed. "Eh, of course I couldn't fool you, you've lived with the capsule lady for so long. By the way, I kinda envy you for that, you know? She's very, well..."

He took a conspiratorial air and started making some vague, exaggerated circular gestures around his chest. Goku was about to point out that no, she wasn't fat at all, when a mighty wham made them turn their heads. Muten was back, and the second rock was in place. In a hand he also brought two thick steel rods.

"Stop blabbering nonsense and come around," he said, jovially, and the pupils obeyed. "Now, let's start today's first test. I want to check something. Krillin, would you mind grabbing that rock and tossing it as far as you can?"

Krillin nodded enthusiastically and ran off to the rock. After a bit of huffing he managed to lift it - he had to basically hug it, so massive it was compared to his body size - and then with a whirl he launched it away. The boulder flew for fifty metres or so before stopping.

The master beckoned to the other kid. "Now, Goku, if you would do the same with the other...?"

Goku ran to his own rock, and did something similar to what Krillin had. His gestures and motions were roughly similar, but when he spun to toss the rock, he seemed to blur out, and the rock ended up falling some good twenty metres further than Krillin's.

The bald kid was not happy. He eyed his companion alarmed.

Muten, on the other hand, looked unperturbed. "Hmm, yes, that's about what I expected." he said. "Krillin, Goku, please go fetch those rocks and bring them here. Gently, this time, no tossing. Let's repeat the experiment."

Mumbling, Krillin went to do as he'd been told, followed by Goku. One minute and some panting later, the rocks were back in their initial positions.

"Now give me a minute. This time our test will be a little different."

Muten left the two pupils to look at him confused while he went and searched two more rocks, significantly smaller. When he found them he jammed one of each in front of the big ones, then took the iron rods and stuck them under the big rocks, forming levers which had the small ones as fulcra,
"Very well, now come here." he called his students. "Now with all the strength you can, try to toss the rock. Do it with a single push, when I give you the signal. Right, in position... three, two, one... NOW!"

Goku and Krillin simultaneously pushed hard on their respective steel rods. Krillin's went down, and its other extremity correspondingly tossed the rock in the air. It was a rather disappointing throw - nothing as spectacular as the first time, and most of the starting velocity was directed upwards, so it ended up in a parabola which hit the ground again only one or two metres away from the starting point.

Meanwhile, Goku was staring dumbfounded at a broken steel rod, and his rock hadn't moved one inch.

"Oh, I guess this was a bit too hard for-" had started Krillin, with a smug expression, before Muten cut him off with a hand gesture.

"Can you guess why that happened, Goku?" asked the old master.

The boy thought about it for a second. "I used too much strength," he decided. "I knew from the beginning I had to limit myself, but I still couldn't gauge the exact amount. My myoibo can take more than this. And I only had one sudden push, so I couldn't slowly increase the strength until I felt the bar was beginning to bend, in order to get a sense for its resistance."

"That's all correct, but you're missing the root cause." said Muten. "See, Krillin was pretty much in the same conditions as you, but he managed to toss the rock - though I'm sure he could do better with a bit of exercise. But that was not the point of this test. Neither of you could get it perfectly right the first time. And if you look at Krillin's rod, why, it is a little bent. So why is it that yours broke completely?"

"My grandpa mentioned that my physical strength is lacking." Goku frowned. "Does it have to do with that?"

"Precisely, Goku. Yes, Gohan was right on point." Muten grabbed the broken, pointy steel rod and used it to scratch numbers in the dirt. "See, suppose you need to achieve a strength of fifty to toss the boulder. It's a strength way beyond the possibilities of the regular human body - a superhuman strength. So you need to use spiritual energy, ki, to bolster your muscles and achieve that much. We all do."

"But Krillin, here, has a base strength of, let's say ten. Ki acts as a multiplying factor to your strength, so he needs five. But what if he makes a mistake in judging how much strength to put originally into the push, without considering ki? Suppose he makes a mistake of one, then he ends up using eleven - which times five, makes fifty-five. An error of five."

"Now suppose your base strength was five - don't take these numbers seriously, it's just to give you an idea. Then you'd need ten units of ki to reach your final amount, fifty. But if you make the same exact error in judgement as Krillin, just one, you end up with a total strength of sixty, and an error of ten. And your lever breaks instead of just bending."

Goku nodded, following along the explanation. "But then, can't I just adjust how much ki I use?" he asked.

"Yes, of course. But our bodies, no matter how good a martial artist you are, learn first to use and
judge our basic strength, and rely on that more, especially for precision movements. You don't use ki to pick up a glass of water or write with a pen, do you?"

The boy shook his head.

"Well, this is more or less it. You're more used to feel with your physical strength, and that's what usually you do the fine tuning on when trying to decide how much is appropriate for a situation. With fighting, it's not very important, because your body already knows the exact amount of strength you want to exert in any given situation. You wouldn't be much of a combatant if you couldn't gauge your own strength precisely. I had to put you into an unfamiliar situation for it to show. And I'm sure with two or three more tries you'd end up getting it right anyway."

"So what you're saying is, I need to train my body and muscles more over my ki control." concluded Goku. "How can I do that?"

Muten's eyes twinkled, and he slung around the large turtle shell he kept on his back with two ridiculously thick straps. When the shell hit the ground, it made a menacing thrumming sound and sent vibrations all around.

"I'm glad you asked," said the old man, smiling.

Bulma walked carefully through the path to the centre of the lab - not that, on her own, she was sure she could have spotted it. The thing that distinguished it from the rest of the room was that one could vaguely identify a path wide enough for a human to pass through amidst the mountains of electronic equipment and various instrumentation that had been incoherently accumulated on either side. Commander Black was right before her, and behind followed Bandages. Having walked through the canyon, they finally found themselves in a broader opening, roughly circular, with most of the racks and computer displays arranged on desks all around the perimeter, and a few benches in the centre, as well as what looked like mannequins. One of the benches was hosting a mechanical arm, not unlike the one Mai had been using, bolted to supports for some kind of test or repair. The mannequins were fitted with other technological implements - some of them supported mechanical legs or arms, others had cybernetic armbands; one in particular was transparent, and woven through with a circulatory system of thin, shiny metallic wires, with a bigger device in place of where a human's heart would be.

Two young people in labcoats - one blonde and one with black hair, roughly the same height and haircut - were working at a desk. The black haired one had his eye put to the ocular of a microscope, while the blonde one was taking notes on a clipboard. On the other side of the opening, a middle aged man with a ridiculously long and unkempt mane of graying hair was tinkering with a circuit board. Or perhaps, tinkering wasn't the right word. The fury and forcefulness with which he stuck in components and applied the solderer suggested more an inquisitor trying to torture the circuitry into returning the result he expected from it, or else.

"Doctor Gero," said Black, "I have brought you a guest."

The man lifted his eyes from the work he was doing, furious with having been interrupted. Then his fury morphed entirely into more fury. Bulma had seen him for all of ten seconds and she was already wondering if this person had any more emotional range than 'pissed off'.

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"You brought the girl to my lab!," shrieked the scientist. "I told you I don't want anyone spying on my-

"I brought the girl to your lab, like I said I would," replied Black, firmly. "Your opinion was never a factor. You're still a member of the Red Ribbon, doctor, and I gave you a direct order. You are to collaborate with her. You are to work together within the extent of what she can reveal of her work. And you are to come up with solutions that can help us during the upcoming-"

"I know, I know. I've been briefed." Dr. Gero snapped, curtly. He still was obviously very annoyed, but while he never displayed outright deference, he also clearly didn't dare push back too much. His vivacious eyes kept darting from Bulma to Bandages, and back. "Not that I think the girl will be of much use. She's basically a toddler."

"Excuse me!?"

"I think this is where I leave you," said the commander. "Have fun. And remember, you will have to work together for the next three months, so, do keep that in mind."

As he said that, his gaze fell both on Gero and Bulma. Bulma found that baffling - was he suggesting that she could do any worse than this prideful, misanthropic old ass she'd been dumped on?

And then he walked out. Bandages crossed his arms and positioned himself at the edge of the lab, said, "well, imma stay here and keep an eye on you guys," and went on to do just that and basically nothing else. Which left Bulma alone in a laboratory with three perfect strangers, one of which, she was pretty sure, already hated her with murderous rage. Which made it a relief when one of the other two approached her.

"I apologise for our boss. He can be a bit grumpy," said cheerfully the young man, extending his hand. He was really cute, she noticed, with almost feminine traits - a clean face and slightly angled eyes that gave him a mischievous air. His hair was perfectly black and straight, cut exactly to neck height.

Bulma nodded warily and shook the hand back. When she got a glance of the other person, she saw basically the same face, except female. And of course with blonde hair.

"Uhm, are you two..." she started asking, looking from one to the other and back.

"Wearing matching lab coats? You got us!" said the man with a chuckle. Then, laughing at her bafflement, "Oh, and twins," he added.

Well, at least this guy seemed nicer than Gero. Much nicer. "Pleased to meet you," she said. "Bulma Briefs."

"As if you needed to tell us that!," the other chuckled again. "But the pleasure is ours. I'm Lapis, and she," and he pointed at his sister, right behind him, "is Lazuli."

The woman made a greeting gesture. She didn't seem nearly as hostile as Gero, but compared to her brother, her expression was so deadpan Bulma couldn't help feel she was not exactly registering as anything more important to her than, say, wallpaper with a slightly interesting pattern.

"Lapis and Lazuli, that's easy to remember," she commented, attempting a smile as well, though the awkwardness hadn't exactly gone away. "I guess your parents liked gemstones?"

"No, they liked metamorphic rocks," said Lapis, dead serious, "and we didn't even get the worst of it. Just never bring the topic up with our younger sister, Amphibolite."
There was a moment of stunned silence. Bulma blinked, unable to form any words.

"By the way, that's not true and we have no sisters," sighed the blonde woman, speaking for the first time in a very tired voice. "He just likes messing with people."

"Right." Bulma nodded, slowly. She was beginning to dread the thought of the next three months. "So what do you do here?"

Lazuli stepped in before her brother could even start answering. Perhaps to keep the conversation as efficient and painless as possible, something that Bulma was becoming more appreciative of.

"We're lab assistants for the doctor," she explained. "My brother is a biologist, while I'm a data scientist. We've been helping with his research during the last year."

"Oh! But you look very young," commented Bulma, interested. "I didn't know you could get this kind of job at this age. How old are you?"

Lapis looked quickly at his watch. "I'm seventeen, and she's eighteen," he said.

Bulma blinked a bit in puzzlement. "Oh, uh," she stammered in the end, when the implication finally clicked, "happy birthday, I guess-"

"Will you stop that!" Lazuli's slap hit her brother's head on the back, while he ducked to dodge it and laughed. "We're both twenty-four, Bulma. Seriously... that stupid joke wasn't that funny even the first time, and at least that time it was our birthday."

"But it's true that I'm the younger twin," chimed in Lapis, "by all of forty-five seconds."

"So how did you get this job?" asked Bulma. "I guess you already graduated?"

"We both have a Master's Degree, yes." replied the other. "Our dad works as a contractor for the Red Ribbon, so when we were looking for a company to have an internship with..."

"...because you were too lazy to bother looking further than your own nose..." added Lazuli.

"...yes, well, because of reasons, we ended up doing it here. But once we got into all this top secret stuff and got the gist of it, the good doctor here thought it would probably be better to just keep us close rather than find replacements, and so, lo and behold!, we got a job."

Bulma whistled appreciatively. "And you, Lazuli? You don't sound as happy of the situation as him."

The woman sighed. "I am not," she said, in a slightly hushed voice, then pointed at her brother. "But you've just met him. Do you think I should let him go around, working unsupervised in secret weapon labs?"

They exchanged understanding stares. Lapis acted very scandalised at the suggestion that he wasn't a responsible adult, then shrugged it off.

"Amazing, you youngsters really hit it off, huh?" said an extremely displeased, raucous voice. "Well, I'm sure the samples will be so happy they will just start analysing themselves, then."

Lazuli sighed and shook her head, then tugged at her brother's sleeve. Dr. Gero looked at them until they took back their original positions at the desks, then turned back to his own work.

Bulma was beginning to feel really irked. She had suspected she might incur into some degree of
resistance, as many scientists she knew of were jealous of their work and almost none were especially sociable types, but this was beyond ridiculous. At this rate, she could just as well up and leave; the outcome would be pretty much the same. She decided that was not going to be it. After all, hadn't the doctor been ordered to collaborate? That meant it was almost as if she was his boss at this time. He would have to stop with the hostile act, whether he liked it or not.

The girl walked up to the table where Gero was now viciously stabbing the circuit board with an intricate pattern of multihued plugs. There were sockets for the plugs, of course, but the way he was jamming it in you would have thought otherwise.

"Uhm, interesting work you got there," said Bulma, tentatively. "So, what is it?"

The other didn't even look at her. "An improved neural-network assisted biomechanic nerve impulse transducer for prosthetics," he grumbled.

"Oh, cool." continued the girl, trying to be conversational. "So, uhm, it's basically circuitry to connect artificial limbs so that they can be controlled by thought?"

He raised his eyes and squinted. "If your understanding of these things is that of a five year old kid, sure."

Bulma squinted. Her patience for being conversational was quickly running out.

"Ok, let's talk frankly." she said, grabbing Gero's rotating chair and turning it so that he was forced to look at her. "I got it, you don't like me. I'm not crazy about you either, if first impressions are worth a damn. But we're supposed to work together. What the fuck is your problem?"

The two assistants stared in a mix of awe and terror. Bandages whistled appreciatively and grinned.

Dr. Gero's face contorted in the scariest grimace yet.

"The problem," he hissed, "is that you are a newbie. A greenhorn. A child who's been given a bunch of adult tools and now thinks she can play grown up! What do you know of science?"

He rose up from his chair, red in the face. Bulma stepped back. Bandages tensed, ready to intervene.

"Nothing! You know nothing! You're just an arrogant little brat who thinks she can do it all! I already have to put up with these suited, marching buffoons who consider themselves better than everyone else just because they can fire a gun slightly better than a trained monkey, because they pay for my lab! But now I have to also play babysitter?"

"Well, doctor, didn't you say just one month ago that Bulma Briefs' research was a threat to your-" commenced Lapis, before a well-throw solderer forced him to dodge and stop there.

"I know what I said!" shrieked the man, now completely beyond all self-control. "Oh, sure, she can play with forces she doesn't understand, and perhaps she can even mess around long enough that she'll manage to blow something up! But the subtle dance of the laws of Nature - the delicate handicraft of weaving together the artificial and the biological - the sublime architecture of molecular machines threading through the needle of a DNA loop - what do you understand of all that, girl? You come here without even the intention to contribute anything useful, so just stay out of my way!"

He culminated the speech with a last, high pitched scream of exasperation, then, his face purple with effort and emotion, he turned around and slammed back into his chair. Everything was silent for a moment.
Bulma looked at the doctor, obviously brimming with things she really wanted to tell him to his fucking stupid-ass face. Or, well, that was how she would have put it. Her eyes were burning with indignation, her mouth pursed and ready to unleash Hell on Earth; and then she crossed her arms, grabbed a free seat, sat down.

"Fine," she said, "I'll do just that."

Gero raised his eyebrows in disbelief.

"I'll do that," continued Bulma, "and hey, if Commander Black thinks this is not what he expected of you, it's not going to be my problem what punishment he sees fit to give you. I'll just do my thing. If all goes well, we'll still win the war, and the way things are going, the Red Ribbon will be dissolved shortly afterwards, and you'll lose your lab and funding. But what do I care? It's not like I understand anything."

The doctor frowned, Lapis was barely hiding his amusement, and Lazuli sent Bulma a gaze of sincere admiration.

"That is, of course, if we win the war. In the most unfortunate case that we lose - and trust me, they'll have to walk over my dead body before I allow that - then I wonder what King Piccolo and his goons would do to the members of the organisation that fought him off so fiercely. But hey, what do I know. Maybe the unhinged fanatics who worship power and the law of the strongest will suddenly discover a deep respect for science and intellect and just enslave you to work developing weapons for them. Which will only give you more time to wonder, oh, if only I had worked together with that brilliant young scientist as I'd been told to, maybe together we would have come up with something that could have stopped all this from happening!"

"Great dramatic interpretation," snarled Gero, "but I still don't see any evidence you'll be useful for doing science. I'll call you if I ever need a playwright, though."

"You know, perhaps to get to that point you should try and give me something to work with," replied Bulma. "Give me a tour of your lab. Introduce me to your work. You seem to be an expert in prosthetics, is that your main interest?"

"Prosthetics, you say!" Indignant, the doctor jumped up and walked to the mechanical arm that was on the bench and patted it. "Why, yes, you could call them that if you have the limited mind of a peasant! These are art! These are masterpieces of neuromechanical knowledge, superior interfaces between electronic and neural systems, these are enhancements! People should be grateful for having their fleshy, weak natural appendages replaced with these perfected forms!"

The girl took an alarmed look. "Wait, have you been chopping off people's limbs to--"

"The Commander wouldn't allow it." growled back Gero. "Apparently, turning them into invincible war machines would affect the troops' morale! Cowards and fools, the lot of them. I've only been allowed to use these for amputees. You can order them to fight to the death, but suddenly cutting one or two useless lumps of organic tissue is a step too far-"

"If you think they're so great," interrupted Bulma, "why don't you just use them on yourself?"

"And yet again, you show why you understand nothing!," snapped the scientist. "Do you think just anyone can install these? They're not hand hooks and peg legs! It's a delicate operation, and I would not trust anyone with lesser knowledge of their sophisticated interfaces than myself to mount them on my own body! The Red Ribbon field surgeons make a botched horrible job of it, and screw up about half the nerve connections. Oh, sure, it's good enough for their goons who only have to shoot and
Bulma thought she was getting the gist of how to talk to the doctor, now. The key to it seemed to just keep his anger focused on something other than her, and then sort of naturally make the conversation move from one topic to the other. As long as he had a chance to vent about something he was pissed off at (and there seemed to be a vast reserve of that), Gero could actually be quite talkative.

"So I suppose they couldn't install any of these either?" she said, casually, putting her hand on a glass case that hosted what looked like steel fingers with holes at the tip.

"Those! Those! Don't get me started on those!" shouted the man, as he got started on those. "Guns embedded in one's fingers are the perfect emergency weapon! And just because it looks like their use will occasionally break a few bones in some weaklings whose wrists can't even handle a little recoil-"

Commander Black didn't like to linger too much on his potential mistakes. Years and years of action in the field had taught him that the best thing to do when you realised you'd made an error was to own it and try to turn its consequences to your advantage. Regret never won a battle.

Nevertheless, he couldn't help but feel slightly uneasy about having allowed Bulma Briefs to meet doctor Gero, and wondered if that had not been, indeed, a mistake. After all, the doctor had quite the difficult personality. It may have been hoping too much to think that they could get along long enough to actually produce something useful. In the worst case scenario, they would hamper each other's productivity and end up doing less over these three months than they would have done otherwise.

And so, because he felt uneasy, his walking from one task to the other inside the base ended up leading him back to the R&D department, like an asteroid drawn in by the gravitation of a massive planet, and eventually he was standing right outside the door of the lab.

"And this!," screamed a voice inside, seething with rage, "this is a framework for biomechanical reanimated androids! You see, since they said mass producing entirely mechanical androids was too expensive, I thought what's cheap and readily available in war? Corpses! You can usefully and productively recycle corpses, brain included, with the addition of only 30% of mechanical material, as android soldiers, who have nearly one fourth of their original cognitive faculties and last for almost three months before it becomes impossible to further postpone critical rotting, after which the mechanical components can be recovered and reutilised. It's perfect! But no, then it was all, our soldiers' families want their bodies back, Gero, and, no one wants to fight next to an army of stinking decomposing cyborg zombies with the faces of their dead friends, Gero... I could only make seven prototypes until now, with limited combat capabilities, no thanks to central command for its support! I was about to start working on the eighth right before this whole nonsense started-"

Black listened to the rant for almost a minute. Then his hand, that had been on the door's handle, withdrew; he turned his heels and walked away.

It seemed like he'd been worrying over nothing. The meeting obviously was going as well as it could.
After the tour was almost complete, Bulma had managed to build herself a more consistent opinion of Dr. Gero and his work. She had reached the conclusion that the scientist was, undoubtedly, one of the most brilliant minds to ever walk the Earth. It was unbelievable how much he had achieved; almost as unbelievable as the fact that, outside Red Ribbon laboratories, none of these inventions had been widely commercialised or even known, even though many were revolutionary advancements over existing technologies. She would need to bring that up with Commander Black; it was entirely possible that Red (who everyone seemed to agree was a total moron) had not been far-sighted enough to realise what he had in his hands. He had probably considered Gero's output as an eccentric hodgepodge of occasionally useful biomedical technology that could give their mutilated soldiers an edge and bring them back into battle. He had failed to see that the same products, if taken out of secrecy and mass-produced, could easily make more money than all of the Red Ribbon's mercenary activities combined.

The other thing Bulma had realised about Dr. Gero was that he was completely, utterly insane. His achievements were probably superior to her own father's, but that wasn't entirely surprising because there didn't seem to be anything in his life outside of his work in this laboratory. In fact she wasn't sure he had a life outside of his laboratory. She had noticed a sleeping cot tucked in a corner among all the instrumentation, and there were dirty plates and empty packaging from old ready made meals all over the place. He also lacked any sort of ethical restraint. He did not seem to have yet done anything that would make him cross the line from mad scientist into complete monster, but Bulma had the impression that was more thanks to having been subject to the oversight of people with more sense than him than for lack of trying on his part. That it was the Red Ribbon who had acted as his ethical committee said something very worrying about how unhinged he could probably get.

The thing was, he would also be an indispensable ally, both in this war, and whatever came later. But Bulma could also see how dangerous it would be to let too much knowledge fall into the hands of someone like him.

Having finished the tour of the lab, they were now standing in front of the mannequin that most had drawn Bulma's attention from the get go, the transparent one that was wired through and had an artificial heart. Gero started his explanation of this too.

"-and so, because of all those complaints, I started development on this!," he shouted, gesturing at the whole mannequin. "A complete, minimally invasive support energy network meant to power up and enhance the entire human body. Most of it can be installed with microsurgery and be ready to use in days. It can then support additional devices which are still currently under development."

"Where does it take the energy?," asked Bulma.

"The big reactor in the chest, obviously." Gero sneered. "Installing that is the only complicated part of the operation."

"And where does the heart go, then?" she insisted, fearing she already knew the answer.

"In the garbage can, for all I care!" shrieked the doctor. "All we need is to replace it with a micropump, which is twice as efficient as."

"Let me guess," intervened the girl, "the higher ups and the potential subjects didn't understand this either."
Gero scoffed. "And you do?"

"Hmm-mm."

She put her hand on the mannequin and followed the lines with her finger. Right at the tip of the index of the mannequin, the wire came close to the surface, almost touching it. During all the tour she'd been considering ways in which her and Gero's technology could complement each other, and now there was an intriguing idea in her mind. Here was a system that was meant to control an energy flow through the human body, but required a large, unwieldy power source, whereas she had the technology to tap into a potentially massive source of energy, but not the means to tame it easily. If the two could be made compatible...

"Suppose," she said, "that I could provide you with a source of energy powerful enough to fuel this without removing anyone's heart."

"I don't get what the reason for you people's fixation with hearts is." grumbled Gero.

"Sentimental value, I guess," replied Bulma, with a shrug. "But there would be a practical upside to my idea too. Faster surgery, and if I'm right, you wouldn't even need the additional devices in the end."

The doctor raised an eyebrow. "And this miraculous source of energy would be-?"

"Spiritual energy. Ki."

"It does, and it confirms that you're just a clueless brat. Spiritual energy is unreliable, wild, un reproducible! In another word, unscientific! Martial artists hardly know themselves what is it that they're tapping into or how. There has been no rigour when-"

"Ok, wait."

"You knew about... no, sorry, doctor, of course you did, I'm just a green brat, wrong question. Then what would you say if I told you I believe I have tamed it?"

Gero's frown deepened. "That I would need you to tell me how, or I wouldn't believe you."

"I can't disclose that yet." replied Bulma.

"Hah! So you are all talk and no-"

"But I can show you."

Under everyone's perplexed eyes, she walked to the bench where a mechanical arm was set on, grabbed a stool and sat in front of it. Lapis and Lazuli left their work and turned to watch what was going on. Their boss didn't scold them, and just came closer as well.

Bulma put her elbow on the table and grabbed the mechanical hand with her right one, in the position of an arm wrestling match.

"Can you activate this for me, Doctor?," she asked. "Just have it push as hard as possible."

Lapis gasped, and Lazuli was impassive. Gero didn't say anything - he just went and grabbed a remote from a drawer.

"I'll happily have it break your arm," he said, putting his finger on the device, "if it means you'll stop spouting your delusions and listen to your better."

"Then if / break your arm," she replied, defiantly, "you'll listen to me and work with me for these
three months?"

"Breaking it?" now the doctor's snarl was close to laughter. "Why, you little-

"And, you won't ask any more about how I can do what I'm about to do? It will be only need-to-
know basis for you. I'm sorry, but these are my conditions. Capsule Corporation needs to keep its
secrets, and I'm not convinced that an army of Red Ribbon super soldiers would be any better than
Piccolo."

The spectators looked intently on the little confrontation. Even Bandages was listening with a small
grin on his face.

"Sure, sure!" Gero tossed his hands in the air. "Now stop talking, for goodness' sake, girl. You've
wasted enough of my time already. Let's see what you can do."

Bulma nodded, put herself in position, and slid the free hand in her pocket, where the control for her
stimulator was. She turned the knob to the lowest level. An electric tingle coursed through her body,
from her back to her arm. Her vision sharpened slightly, her arm felt more firm. There was no shock,
no violent contraction or damage. It all felt natural, relaxed, and not particularly magical. She merely
felt like she was on her best shape, all tiredness washed away.

Dr. Gero pressed the button.

The mechanical arm's pressure was brutal, and Bulma had to instantly turn the knob by another notch
to even keep up. Her arm felt the jolt, and now she could perceive the significant effort she was
making. But she held out. Barely - the push was unforgiving and superior to the strength of any
human, woman or man. And she was just a young girl after all, not especially athletic either. Her arm
started bending towards the table. She felt pain course through her muscles up to her shoulder. The
newfound strength given by the spiritual energy running through them was not sufficient to counter
that.

Still, Gero was surprised, though he tried to hide it. And the assistants didn't even try. Lapis in fact
was outright whistling and cheering for her.

"It's not at maximum setting, of course," snarled Gero.

Bulma huffed, but she didn't want to show all her pain and fatigue yet. She forced a defiant grin.

"Bring it on." she said.

Gero tapped another button, and the pressure doubled. Bulma correspondingly turned up the knob.
Now the power was brutal too, taking over her arm, moving it almost outside of her control. The
pain didn't come any more from being pushed down - it came from the current within her muscles,
empowering them to levels they couldn't take, ripping them up at a cellular level.

But still, she was being pushed down.

A quick estimate told her she'd probably need to be twice as strong as she was now to win this. The
stimulator had enough settings for that, it could go up to Goku's level of ki output. But she could
only withstand something like that for a brief moment, and she wasn't even sure she could survive it.
Double the current setting was already way too far into the danger zone. Still, on this could hinge the
future, of the war and of her own quest for knowledge. If she won, she could submit this proud,
crazy doctor Gero to her will, for a while at least. Fascination with her discoveries might push him to
be more malleable and collaborate, in the hopes of finding out more, and with time, who knows,
maybe she could completely pull him to her side. Have her mastery of ki be the honey to draw him
into the trap. There would be a lot to gain. Life, death, and the fate of the world could hang from this single moment. It was worth taking a risk.

On the other hand, if she had to explain to her dad why she'd broken her arm again, he'd kill her.

She emerged from all this pondering after what she found out had just been a couple of seconds. The spiritual energy was enhancing her own perception - speeding up her cognition. She could see, hear, and think faster if she needed to. The mechanical hand had only pushed down hers by a few degrees in the meantime. But she was about to lose.

The arm, however, was less in pain. Was it getting used to the power flowing through it? She considered this for a moment. After all, if spiritual power strengthened the body, why shouldn't it also strengthen its ability to withstand more spiritual power? This kind of process couldn't go on forever, of course, or she or Goku would literally be able to achieve infinite strength, but perhaps she could build a greater tolerance to gradual increases than to sudden bursts of power. She hazarded pushing the setting up a bit again.

The pain flared up with renewed viciousness, and she gritted her teeth as her whole arm felt like each fibre rebelled to what it was being subjected to. She must now be exerting a force above twenty times her natural maximum output, and well beyond a regular human's limits. She couldn't keep this up for long at all, and now she needed to focus additional ki in her legs and body just to stay in the chair under the backreaction to her own strength. But the pain subsided, again, as the arm grew used; not as much as before, not quite as much, but there still was room to go...

"Watch," she panted, gasping with pain, "watch this-

Gero didn't say anything. He just stared, fascinated, to the point he seemed to have forgotten to keep up his scowl. Rather, his eyes sparkled with curiosity and were fixated on her, on every detail of what she was doing, inquisitive, hungry. His helpers gazed similarly in silence. The black haired boy who'd been so lively just a few minutes before now was looking intently, biting his lip.

I got him, thought Bulma, let's give him the best show of his life. She gritted her teeth, preparing herself for what was coming. She thought she could take it, now. Her body had grown used enough to it. Still, it'd better only last an instant, and it was not like it would not be painful.

In fact, it would probably hurt like Hell. Or almost like it.

She turned the knob almost to the end of the scale. Lightning exploded through her body, her veins pulsed inside her temples, she felt her own skin and muscles ripple and bulge unnaturally, and her hair slightly lifting itself, as if charged with static electricity. She screamed in pain, closed her eyes, and pushed. She knew it would only be one instant. She was already turning the knob down right as she hit the top, but it still felt like it was lasting forever. But in that forever, slowly, the metal under her hand gave way. It groaned, it creaked, but it couldn't keep up. One or two hydraulic pistons burst. And with one last, fierce crash, the entire thing was finally slammed into the table, and the table itself was dented and cracked by the impact, and at the end there was only an immobile wreckage, broken and bent in multiple spots, left of what had been a perfectly functional mechanical arm. Sprawled on the desk, Bulma couldn't even lift her hand from the spot where it had achieved its victory. It all hurt. All of it. Around her, three very baffled scientists couldn't muster a single meaningful thing to say. In his corner, Bandages burst out in a coarse laugh and started clapping slowly.

"Did you see," panted Bulma, with a happy grin, and her chest hurt with every word, "that, doctor-

Then she got dizzy, her vision darkened, and she didn't feel neither happiness nor pain nor anything
else any more.

Chapter End Notes

Well, here comes a much waited encounter! I'm sorry for the long time I took, but this has been a very busy time at work, which means I've had almost no time or energies to write for weeks on end. I had to write a lot to manage to publish this one chapter today, but I didn't really want to drag it for any longer. Thanks again for your constant support, and to the next time!
**Chapter 27 - Wake me up when September begins**

First, the idea and characters of Dragon Ball are owned by Akira Toriyama. This is a simple non-profit fan parody.

See the end of the chapter for more **notes**

*Her sleep was deep, but not dreamless.*

Images kept flashing incoherently through her mind. Dreams of strength and power. She could take bullets head on, she could overthrow tanks, she could uproot entire buildings and turn them on the head of her enemies. As strong as Goku. Stronger, even.

She had nothing to fear. She could bring justice and repair all torts and have some fun in the process. She could be adored as a saviour. She felt her chest swell with pride, joy and an inebriating sense of freedom.

She could do anything. She was powerful.

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**June 23, 750**

*Red Ribbon Headquarters*

When Bulma came to her senses, the pain was the first thing that came back. Dull, throbbing pain in all muscles and tendons and joints. Then, slowly, came back hearing and sight, and full consciousness. After squinting a bit in front of the bright light (her eyes were hypersensitive too), she managed to get a sense of her surroundings. She was in the white environment of an infirmary, lying on a cot. A sharp pain in her right arm - slightly different from the pain she felt in everything else - made her notice that there was an IV dripping something into her. She also thought there was someone else in the room, but couldn't well turn her head to see.

"How long," she asked, and each word, too, was painful, "how long was I out?"

" Barely fifteen minutes," answered the deep voice of Commander Black. "I apologize, miss Bulma. I thought it would be fine to leave you alone with that man, since you had a bodyguard. It did not occur to me that the biggest danger to your safety could come from yourself."

"Shows that you don't know me," chuckled Bulma. The Commander didn't show any sign of being amused. "How bad is it?"

"Not as bad as I'm sure it feels," he replied. "All your bones are intact, if that's your worry. The nurse was very confused. You're perfectly healthy, other than for the fact that you look like you managed
to exhaust yourself utterly, the way a human body would after days and days of continued, extenuating physical labour."

The man paused.

"I left you alone for twenty minutes, miss Bulma."

The girl pushed herself a bit up. It cost effort and more pain, but she didn't like talking without seeing her interlocutor. Black, it turned out, had an expression between reproach and bafflement.

"There's a trick to it, of course," she said. "I'm afraid that falls within the, ah, scope of those things I'm not supposed to divulge too much into detail."

"Of course," Black sighed. "I will not inform your father. You should recover soon anyway, from what the doctor says, with just rest and a healthy dose of nutrients to replenish everything you used up. I think our relationship is strained enough without him knowing I allowed his daughter to get into an infirmary within one hour since when she was left in my care."

"Why, thank you, partner in crime," Bulma grinned. Then she frowned in worry. "That makes me think - who brought me here?"

"I did," said Bandages stepping from the side. "Gotcha right up after you fell down. That lecher old doctor, why, he was already going for you. Grabbing and touching you around. I got him to take his paws off."

"What!," Black was outraged. "I knew he could be unscrupled but I didn't think-"

"Ah, relax, Commander." Bulma raised a hand weakly. "I'm sure it's a, huh, misunderstanding. Dr. Gero couldn't resist his need to know what am I hiding under my clothes, is all."

Bandages frowned. "Yeah, that's what I said."

The commander was quicker on the uptake. "Your trick, I guess?"

She nodded. "Well, I'll have to tell him something of course, or we won't be able to work together. But it will be on my terms - sorry, Commander, you understand. Still, it's good that he's hooked on this little mystery now. Maybe he'll stop being such a bore."

"You intend to use your tech as... bait?" Black was baffled. "To get him to cooperate?"

"You know a better way?"

The Commander paused for a while, thinking back to years, decades of working with doctor Gero as the leader of the research division. Years of amazing technological advances and even more amazing headaches.

"Just try your best to stay safe, miss Bulma," he concluded. "I'll go back to my job."

In the dream, the city was under siege. Malicious, nameless power had grasped at it; the cowards and the sicophants had jumped at the chance of serving it, while the weak suffered under its boot. She was alone, with a few loyal friends, fighting a battle with no end and no hope of victory.

But there, at the core of the strife, she felt free.
The room was a lounging space with a couple sofas, ill assorted chairs and other random furniture, as well as a couple shelves full of books. The night before, there had been laughing, and music, and endless debating and arguing about how to best continue opposing those who wanted their city turned into an ugly replica of a military fortress. Now there was none of that - just a bit of morning light filtering through the windows, a lingering smell of alcohol, and the snoring of a couple of the louder guys.

Erasa got up from the sofa she'd fallen asleep on with a start, then, realising after a moment where she was, and feeling the dizziness of an imminent hangover, she groaned and let herself fall back. Some of the guys were more in the habit of sleeping at the venue after a meeting, but she usually would go back home. Last night, though, she'd lost control a bit.

She was startled when she put down a foot and instead of the floor found someone. Sure enough, on the floor right next to her was sleeping Yamcha, the guy she'd invited to the meeting in provocation at the protest against Capsule Corporation and who had actually shown up the night before, all sweaty and slightly worked up, but not a minute late. She'd asked why he'd felt the need to run, he'd replied that it was just an evening jog.

She looked at him, then at herself. She focused really hard to think about last night. She was pretty sure she'd not lost control that much, though.

He didn't show any signs of waking up; she needed to get off the sofa. Well, he looked tough built, he probably could take some punishment. So she just stepped on his chest and used him as a step. Coffee needed to be made.

"What's the big idea?" mumbled the boy, turning around and rubbing his eyes.

"Breakfast," answered Erasa, deadpan. She tossed a few spoons of sugar in each of two cups. "If you want to be functioning today, you'll need it."

"Uh, sure. What time is it?"

She checked the wall clock. "Half past seven," she replied.

"Oh, crap! I have to go!"

Yamcha jumped up from the floor, suddenly fully awake. He didn't even wait for Erasa to pour any coffee, since it was still boiling - he just grabbed the cup and chugged down the sugar as it was.

"What's the rush?" she asked, amused. "That Bulma works you that hard? You know, you have rights-"

"That's not it," he said, running to the door. "This is more of a, huh, volunteering thing. A hero thing. A save-the-world kind of thing."

"Well, now that's my kind of thing." Erasa smiled. "Am I invited?"

Yamcha stumbled a bit. "Problem is, it's a bit far." he said, looking away from her.
She scoffed. "How far can it be?"

"About 2,000 kilometres," replied Yamcha, and he zoomed out of the door, closing it behind him.

Erasa blinked. Why, all in all, it wouldn't be too bad if he showed up again, she thought.

---

There was gunfire all around him, and raging war machines running over trees and across muddy terrain, and planes screaming through the sky, and bombs and artillery shell tearing holes in it all. He'd seen it often. He'd dreamed of it even more often.

He'd never been so afraid of it before.

---

July 2, 750

The plains west of the Capital

The soldier woke up. The soldier walked quickly into the field showers that were part of the large capsule barracks, got washed in his three minutes of allotted time, dressed in uniform and geared up. He tied the red bandana that was the symbol and pride of his army to his left arm last. He checked his gun. He checked his ammunition.

The sergeant gave a quick briefing. They had been stationed there to stand guard in case something happened. Well, something had happened. A small force of the traitors had been spotted and seemed to be marching south-west. It was probably just a minor action; perhaps they were trying to recover some of the material dropped during their rushed abandonment of Desert Fox Den. But harassing such small forces was what they were there for. It was hardly the stuff that wins wars, but someone ought to do it. That someone was them. So they damn better do it properly.

The soldier marched with hundreds of his companions next to him. They spread out, camouflaged and prepared an ambush. The terrain didn't offer much for that, so they would need to move fast. They would be spotted soon. There would be a lot of firing, and very little cover to hide behind. There were some of those new incredible civilians back at HQ; the soldier had seen them, and even trained with them, once. But they were too important to accommodate for something like this. One does not play their best card so early in the match. The soldier knew he wasn't one of the best cards at all.

The firing started. The soldier shot back when necessary, tossed grenades when necessary, took cover when necessary. Training made it all automatic. He just had to rely on those instincts to do what they needed and get him out alive. Shoot, toss, cover. Easy.

There was something though. A feeling of unease on the back of his mind. Something lingering from when he'd woken up - he was not sure what. But his reactions, he thought, were slower today. He tossed when he should have shot. He didn't take cover until one second too late. The bullets were already zipping above him, and missed him by sheer dumb luck.

He breathed and steadied himself. This was work. He'd done it a hundred times before. He was trained for it. It was easy.

He was sure he had it now. He got up, with renewed confidence.

He should have shot. He knew he should. The enemy was in his crosshair. But his finger betrayed
him - just a trembling, an instant of weakness, in which it didn't squeeze the trigger quite hard enough.

Someone else shot first, and the feeling of unease went away, and so did everything else.

_He was surrounded by allies, and it felt worse than being surrounded by enemies. He could not see their faces; it was as if a thousand blank mannequins walked next to him, a thousand puppets whose strings ended in unknown hands. He knew the attack would come, eventually. He kept ready to meet it in kind; his gun ready, his attention sharp as it had never been before. Yet he also knew it would still not be enough. A blade would lift, and it would sink in his back, and no matter how keen he was, he would not be fast, sharp, distrustful enough to see where it was coming from._

He'd never felt so betrayed.

_July 5, 750_

"-and the attacking force managed to retreat with minimal losses, which at this point is, huh..."

The soldier giving the report trailed off, as he realised his boss wasn't really listening any more. Commander Black was half bent over his desk, pinching the bridge of his nose with two fingers.

"That's enough, soldier," he said, with a weary voice. "You are dismissed."

The soldier saluted and walked out of the office. Black was left alone with his thoughts, the printouts of many reports like the one he'd just heard from the days before, and a heavy, oppressive silence.

"Who is it?," he mumbled to himself, shuffling around all the reports.

Because it had to be _someone_. One loss in conditions where they should have had all the advantages could be a coincidence. Two were the sign that something may be wrong. Four in a row meant there was a big problem. It was either incompetence or treachery at work, and he didn't think of himself as being incompetent.

These were all minor skirmishes, of course, nothing decisive, but all part of the vast game of chess he was playing on the world's board against - who was leading the Instruments again?, they didn't really know. Maybe Colonel Green, he saw his hand behind some of the sneaky tactics he was facing. Control of information, of transport, of territory was going to be key, come the day the Dragon Balls awaken again. Whoevery could start maneuver their troops closer, and faster, would win. And it was only a few cities out there, and an awful lot of scarcely populated and often inhospitable lands that the King himself had a hard time upholding his law over.

And they were losing that game.

The pattern was irregular but unmistakeable. They would launch a few attacks, obtain some wins, usually with the enemy retreating a bit too fast, fighting not hard enough. Then they would get intel about a safe opportunity and find themselves facing instead twice the numbers they thought they would; or suddenly forced to confront the opponent from an unfavourable position. And none of that could happen if the enemy didn't have reliable information on them. Which meant someone was passing it to them.

And really, he should have seen it coming. They had been betrayed once already. Why not twice?
Why couldn't the Instruments just do the smart thing, and leave aside a few soldiers with the order to *not* participate in the global mutiny, but stay behind, pretend they were still loyal, and then pass around the occasional hint?

Black raised himself from his seat and left the office. He walked through the corridors of strategic command and downstairs to the entertainment and training facilities, where the gym was. He stripped himself to only a pair of trunks, bandaged his hands, put on gloves, and started punching.

As he hit the sandbag time and time again, with all the anger he would have rather unleashed on his enemies, his mind cleared up. He knew well the way forward in this kind of situation, after all. When only one logical path is open to you, there is no reason to hesitate taking it. He would have to operate in the assumption that *everyone* could be compromised; simple as that. He would have to devise operations planned as honey pots to draw the traitors out. He would redouble controls over everyone who had miraculously escaped from bases that had otherwise been overwhelmed by the Instruments; and for every soldier there would be limits placed on their ability to communicate with the outside. It wouldn't be popular with them, but this was not the time for worrying about popularity. And the final plan, of course, needed to be designed with all this in mind. They could take one or two leaks *now*, however damaging they might be. They could not take any weakness once the day of the all-out battle came.

That was all there was to it. Just trust no one. How hard could it be?

She was in a large room, in a big castle. She was surrounded by mounds, mountains of toys. Dolls and plushies and rocking horses. She had a beautiful canopy bed and a wardrobe full of beautiful dresses, worthy of a princess, like she was.

*But she was alone.*

---

*July 7, 750*

*King Pilaf's castle*

"And well, the Ki- I mean, the usurper has called us again, suggesting that there are some common training exercises that."

" *YER NOT DRAGGING ME TO THOSE DEAD! IF YA WEREN'T MY FUTURE SON-IN-LAW, I'D SPLIT YER HEAD WITH MY AXE FOR SUGGESTING IT!* "

Pilaf ran speedily to barely keep pace with the Ox King, who was striding purposefully through one door after the other in the castle, slamming them open at his passage. They entered the main hall.

"I'm the big bad wolf," was saying Shu, with eyes wide open and an exaggerated, ferocious grimace, "and I'm here to eaaaaahuuuuumpff-"

As the Ox King passed him, his billowing cape caught Shu's head in it, dragging him on the floor. Chichi, whose voice was already ringing with laughter from the impression, started literally rolling on the floor. Then she tossed herself on Shu, sinking the hands in his fur. After all, there were good sides to both big brothers and puppies, and here she had a perfect hybrid of both.

"Hey, boss," whispered Shu from the floor, eyeing Pilaf, who was tailing the Ox King, "what's the big fight about?"
The other didn't answer, just made an alarmed face and a gesture meaning *I'll explain later.* Then caught to his angry guest.

"You agreed to fight, right?" he said, "So why would you not-"

"I agreed to fight alright!" the Ox King crossed his arms and wore an angry scowl. "These guys don't just threaten our unified kingdom, they want to revive Piccolo! Piccolo, of all things! I have to do this as a former disciple of Muten, not just as yer ally! It is my duty as a man!"

"Very well," Pilaf smiled, "so why not fight together with those who already are, you know, fighting it? It only makes our chances better!"

"Ha! Better! A whole lot of nothings is still nothing! I won't be caught fighting with those Red Ribbon murderers dead! They want to do their own thing, long as they don't get in my way, they're welcome to it. I'll listen to what that Bulma girl has to suggest, she's a smart lass, and to Master Muten allright. But yer not making me rank and file with those - with those-!"

Chichi got up from the floor, and squeezed Shu's arm. She had lost her hilarity, now. He could see she was a bit scared by her father's outburst of anger, or perhaps she was thinking of something else. He thought to try and distract her with some more faces, but she didn't look like she'd care much for that now.

"Can't you do it at least for Chichi's sake?," asked Pilaf. "If it helps you be safer, shouldn't you-"

A massive finger pushing on his head stopped him in his tracks. Pilaf raised his eyes, terrified, as the Ox King kept him effortlessly pinned in place and bent over to talk to him face-to-face.

"Yer not convincing me by bringing my daughter into it," he said, quietly, and somehow that was *even scarier* than when he'd been shouting before. "Red Ribbon soldiers these, and Red Ribbon that, they're all the same. I'm going to slaughter the ones who want to revive Piccolo, and the others get a pass. For now. But I'm not helping them, I'm not fighting next to them, I'm not training with them. Ya want me to do it for Chichi? Do ya *know* who tried to take my kingdom, years ago? Do ya know why she doesn't have a mother?"

Pilaf didn't know. But, he felt now, he had an inkling. Defeated, he averted his eyes and said nothing.

Chichi, however, probably knew all too well, he realised, when he saw her come forward with an expression close to crying. He felt bad for having created the situation - but what was going through her father's head, too, to say that sort of stuff in front of her?

She ran up to her dad, and without saying anything, she hugged his giant leg, which she could barely circle with both her arms. The Ox King let Pilaf go and used his hand to pat her head. He looked at her for a long moment, thinking about something, but he had his helmet on, covering his eyes, and so whatever his thoughts were, they remained his own.

"I have to do it this way," he said, finally. "As a man."

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*He marched in unison with a thousand more. Where was cynicism, he felt inspiration. Where had been skepticism, he felt the joy of being the part of a whole and a purpose.*

*He wasn't afraid, he didn't doubt, he didn't hesitate. He had faith.*
The shaman's hut was a cramped affair, so chock full of trinkets, dead animals' skulls and skins, amulets, and who knows what else, that it was hard to move inside without hitting something, especially for someone as large as Giran. There was a pungent smell, a mix of the many medicinal, magical and hallucinogenic herbs the shaman always had a reserve of in his pots, and, Giran suspected, some of those skins not being properly tanned.

In the middle, giving the ptero his back, was another of his tribe, an old, grizzled thing; thin, skeletal arms and wings, and a skin stained by age, or too many poisons, maybe. He did not turn around; just raised one sharp claw, in acknowledgement of his guest.

"It's not often I see you here, Giran," he said, in a raspy voice. "In fact, I may not have seen you until you were barely a hatchling."

"Not surprising. This place scared the heck out of me when I was a child."

Giran clumsily sat down, legs crossed, trying not to topple anything. He swatted away some annoying thread that kept obstinately dangling on his forehead from the hut's roof.

"I'd say it perhaps scared you even more as an adult, hmmm?"

The old shaman turned around. He was blind; but he still stared at Giran in a penetrating, fixed way that made him feel uneasy. His eyes were bleached by the disease, and never blinked.

"Me, scared? Of your quackery?" protested the ptero. "I simply did not need it."

The old shaman inclined his head to one side, amused, not offended. "And now you do, though?"

"Perhaps." Giran turned quickly to look behind himself, as if to make sure that no one was about to enter the hut. The curtain at the door didn't move, it just lightly swayed in the wind. "I've been... dreaming. A lot."

"Ah. Dreams." The old ptero nodded. "I've heard about them by your father, Giran. About your mission."

"You should not have." grumbled the other. "I swear, he's going to be the death of me-

"Your father simply needed to confide in someone, to be reassured about the fate of his son. I am with you on this, Giran. You need not fear."

"I know you are. Not everyone is. But listen," Giran leaned in, closer, and lowered his voice, "the mission was completed, and even I can tell that was hardly a coincidence. But there's more. I keep dreaming."

"Oh." The shaman's beak creased. "One loved by the spirits, you are."

"Loved, I would hardly say. The dreams are-," the ptero looked for words, and was at an impasse for a few seconds, "-horrible. Not nightmares, not the usual way. But in them, I'm me, but I'm not me. I feel things that I should not feel, that I do not want to feel."

The other shook his head. "Do we ever feel what we want, Giran? It is more like, our feelings want
for us. Perhaps your dreams merely rip away the fiction - but no, I can see from your distress, this goes beyond. What do you fear, though, is what I must wonder? The dreams guided you true the first time. You may have averted a disaster, thanks to them."

"I can heed the spirits' advice," replied Giran, frowning. "I refuse to become their puppet."

"That is not what spirits do, Giran. For generations they have spoken to us, through dreams, at times, when someone needed to hear them. They advised, they warned, they admonished. But never forced or controlled. The spirits, the dreams, can not bring up something that is not in you already somehow. They can mix and piece together to form a new message. But not create. What you saw is a part of you. You can reject it. Though it would be wise to stop and think if you really want to."

Giran seemed to consider that for a moment. "Then answer me this, old wizard. Do our spirits talk to outsiders? I have heard myself the King speak of a dream that sounded just as prophetic as mine. Is this what our spirits would do?"

For a good minute, the shaman pondered. He did not answer; he stayed so immobile that at one point Giran wonder if he should check whether he was dead for good. But then, when he had almost extended his hand to touch him, he found his word again.

"I can not recall of anything like this," he said, "but who knows? Maybe they do. It is a great danger that our tribe faces, to our lives and to our souls. If our spirits may better protect us by whispering in the ears of foreigners and kings, I am sure that as long as it is in their power, they would do so."

"Hah!"

Giran rose to his feet and ambled towards the door.

"I knew I wouldn't hear much of use from you," he said, standing before the curtain. "You really trust your spirits, do you?"

"I am sorry; you must have known, if you looked for someone fuelling your fear and suspicion, it would not be me." The old shaman smiled. "But in the end, you will do what is in you already. And I trust the spirits know that and showed what you needed to see anyway. Let me ask you - could you interpret the meaning of your dreams?"

"Yes," replied Giran. "I believe the spirits want me to join the training with the Red Ribbon I've been invited to, in preparation for the coming war."

The shaman nodded. "I see. And will you do it?"

"No," muttered Giran, and he traversed the curtain, to emerge in the light of day, out of the dark, dusty, smelly hut.

__He was reliving memories he often came back to; but this time they were distorted, bundled together in ways that twisted time and the order of events. Where in real life there had always been time to think, to heal, here the blows came one after another, relentless. Every time he'd been defeated, every time his face had been kicked into the mud, every time he'd felt powerless, ashamed, humiliated, unable to protect someone or something. Every time he'd felt weak.__

_July 15, 750_
Sherry scooped the meal from a large wok into each plate, and Muten nodded approvingly at the pleasant smile that was spreading from them. Krilllin would have immediately wolfed it all down too if his master hadn't made it very clear that bad table manners earned you one hundred more push-ups for each infraction, subtracted from the usual daily hour of rest. So he limited himself to looking at the food with very greedy eyes and a slightly drooling mouth.

"Spicy fried rice with chicken and steamed vegetables?," asked Muten, looking at the dish. "Sherry, you're surpassing yourself lately!"

"Spicy egg fried rice," she pointed out, sitting down at the table to join them. "But, huh, not really. It's just that Goku's been pestering me about the microwaved stuff, and he's been suggesting the recipes."

She paused for a moment as she ate the first spoonful.

"And chopping the vegetables." she added.

She took another, and made a pleased, appreciative sound.

"And cooking it, really." she finished.

"Goku, is that true?", Muten was genuinely surprised. "Is that why you asked me to start training earlier so you could have half an hour free before lunch?"

"Well, nutritional balance is very important when training," he said, very seriously, "especially protein to build muscle, and I felt that the ready made meals were not quite up to."

He couldn't finish as Krilllin leaned over the table to grab his spoon, fill it with rice and forcefully stuffing it into his mouth. Goku almost spat all the rice as he was still trying to speak, Muten laughed, Sherry laughed, Krilllin laughed, Muten said however funny this still counted as bad manners so he'd have to do the push-ups, Krilllin stopped laughing, good times were had.

When it all calmed down, Muten pinched his beard thoughtfully.

"I must say, you're right, Goku," he said. "The body is built of what we eat, after all; without good food there is no good body. I compliment you on your initiative. In fact, I think we can just make it official. I'll change your schedule a bit so we can make cooking a part of it, and Krilllin can join you."

"Really?!" said the kid, dropping the pout he'd worn since getting the push-ups. Cooking seemed very light work, compared to everything they were doing before.

The master nodded. "Sure! Chopping and cutting can be great exercise for lighter control of your wrist and forearm muscles. Of course, I'll have you use weighted wristbands and knives."

Krilllin groaned.

They ate the rice for a while in silence, as especially Goku and Krilllin barely paused between one spoonful and the next. They had a lot of energies to recover.

"So," said Muten, munching on his food much more slowly than the kids, "Sherry, I may have to leave you the house for a while. I've received an invitation to go to Red Ribbon Headquarters for a
training session."
The two pupils' ears perked up

"Really." Sherry wasn't enthusiastic. "I'm not a housekeeper, I'll remind you."

"Oh, uh, you do remind me of course, quite often-" Muten's chuckling was instantly shut down by a glare from the woman, "-but it will just be a few days, and I'll only take Goku with me."

"What!" Krillin jumped up to his feet. "Master, why does he get to go, but not me?"

"Because he will take part in the war," replied Muten. "But you won't."

"That's not fair! I want to go too!" the kid scowled. "To the training, and to the war."

"Krillin..."

"It's really important, right? The fate of the whole world depends on it! I want to do my part!"

"Now listen..."

"I won't get frozen or scared any more! And I'm stronger now, thanks to your training! I can-"

" Krillin! "

Muten had slammed his spoon right on the table, producing a resounding bang that immediately shut down the kid. When he lifted it again, there was a slight dent in the wooden surface.

"Since you are my pupil, I am responsible for your safety and your life, and I will not let you go into a warzone," said Muten, calmly. "The world will not be in danger. Plenty of competent and strong people will be there to help. It will all be over before Piccolo gets brought back."

"Then why does Goku get to go?," grumbled Krillin, dejected.

"Because he made it clear from the beginning that he's only training with us to prepare for the war, and come September, he'll leave my school regardless," explained the other. "But I swear, disobey me or try to join against my wishes, and so will you."

The pupil gasped. A threat of expulsion - from the Turtle Master, no less - was no joke.

"I think the kid has a point," said suddenly Sherry, breaking the silence.

The old man looked at her with some puzzlement. "Sherry, dear, you don't really have the experience-"

"I'm not a big fighter," she replied, piqued, "but there are things I have experience of. You know, some years ago I was rooming with a few friends of mine - colleagues, you get my drift? - and one of them had, a, well, customer who wasn't very nice. Left her all bruised and with some nasty bleeding cuts. She came home crying, the poor thing."

"So we decided that we needed to make it clear that you mess with one of us, you mess with all of us. We all went to his apartment with whatever weapons we could find. And well, in the end we didn't find him there, so we just trashed his car, then turned it into a capsule and tossed it through the window like a grenade. Wish I'd seen his living room after that."

Sherry concluded the story with a satisfied smile.
Muten cleared his voice. "Nice story, but what did this have to do with us?" he asked.

"What I mean is," replied Sherry, "I wasn't a fighter, but when it was about helping a friend, I went along. And I was scared and sure, I could even have gotten hurt. But that's just the kind of thing you do, you know? It would have hurt even more if I didn't go, things went south, and then I'd have been left wondering if I could have made the difference."

"Yeah! Exactly!" shouted Krillin. "That!"

The old master paused for a long time, massaging his beard.

"I get what you mean," he said finally, slowly. "I really do."

"Then I can...?" tried asking his pupil, hopeful.

"You can join us for the training," replied Muten, quick. "Maybe that will reassure you about our hopes of success. I will not agree to you joining us for the war proper, but at least you'll get an idea of what we're up to."

"Yay!" Krillin jumped up from the chair. "I'm sure I'll be so amazing that the Commander will beg you to let me join!"

"Hey, wait a second," Sherry frowned. "Does this mean I get left here on this island, alone? Let me come too."

"We will be busy anyway," said Muten. "What would you do, alone, in a base full of soldiers?"

The woman looked at him and raised her eyebrows in an expression that said, really?.

Muten shook his head.

"Well, fine, you come too then. Come on, boys, finish eating, then let's go back to training and tomorrow we'll think about preparing for the trip..."

It was all too easy. They fell one after another, no challenge, no resistance. It suited him, sure; the money was good.

But it was also way too boring.

July 22, 750

A small town in the eastern lands

The ptero stepped in the saloon, wearing local garments, a large hat and a loose kind of vest, that conveniently made it hard to see his face clearly. He stopped at the bar to get a drink, exchanging a few friendly words, while his eyes darted around the room until they found what he was looking for. Then he bought a second pint of beer and brought it to a certain table, where a certain man was slouching, feet up, his fingers lazily playing with the hair of his moustache.

The owner would have probably rebuked any other patron who put his shoes on the table like that, but that man was infamous enough that no one would dare complain about anything like it. Similarly, some idiot drunkard might have made fun of his pink vest, or the neat little bow that tied the single
braid of his long hair. But both those things marked him as being, well, *him*, and no one would dare mess with *him*.

That's why even the stranger sitting down at his table with a drink raised a few eyebrows. But then again, those weren't usually the kind of conversations you were supposed to listen in to, so everyone quickly pretended the pair was not even there and went back to their own activities.

"How did you find me?," asked the man, unperturbed.

Piano took off his hat, and pushed the beer towards the other. "I have a source. Professional secret, I'm afraid. You of all people should understand. If it reassures you, nothing that anyone else could have access to right now."

"Hmm."

The man took his feet down and examined his new guest with an inquisitive stare.

"I don't mind," he said, finally. "Anyone who can't even find me is not someone I would bother working for."

"Down to business, I see," Piano smiled. "Very well. Then, here's your contract."

He plunged his hand into a pocket and drew a scrap of paper, handing it to the other man, who picked it up and examined it. Then he quickly drew out a pencil, scribbled something on the same paper and handed it back.

"That's my price."

Piano looked at the paper and colour went away from his face. "That much?," he said. "I don't think that's possible."

"You're from that bunch that's been causing trouble recently, are you not?," replied the other. "That's my price."

"This is a bit more of a... personal initiative. But even if I could draw from our full resources, it would still be way too much. Aren't you perhaps overestimating the difficulty of the task?"

The man chuckled. "Overestimating? Really, mister-prospective-customer, you insult me."

Piano felt a chill. But his guest didn't seem altered.

"She's an easy target. Way too easy, in fact. She's rich and from a powerful family. There are many who would want one like her dead. It is simply a matter of offer and demand. I do not want for money. And I certainly don't intend to spend my days running errands for whoever has such trivial enemies. That's my price."

"I see," the other sighed, albeit trying to conceal his relief. "But then we are at an impasse, I'm afraid. I can not still envision for sure what would be the best target, but I am sure we could use your services at some point. You wouldn't by any chance agree to meet at some point in the future?"

"I can only be hired to kill, mister," said the man. "Name a name, get a price. I don't do home visits."

"Hm." Piano thought about it for a moment, then his eyes lighted up with a flash of insight. He grabbed the pencil that had been left on the table, wrote back another name, as well as a place and a time, and pushed it back.
"And who is this?" asked the other, scrutinising the paper.

"Someone useless," explained Piano. "I can guarantee you will find him where and when I said."

"It's an appointment."

"It's a job."

The assassin waited in silence for a long while, and Piano wondered again if he didn't go overboard and managed to irritate him. But in the end, instead, he chuckled.

"I can appreciate creativity, so I will play along this time." He grabbed the pencil again and wrote down a price. "But do not think that you could pull such a stunt again."

When Piano got to read the price, he was relieved to see an amount much more bearable for his pockets.

"Consider those my travel expenses," said the assassin. "And the real target better be more interesting."

"Oh, I'm sure they will be." Piano smiled. "We have a deal, then."

He slept soundly through all night.
He did not dream once.

August 03, 750
An isolated farm in the south east

"Hey, Jing! Did you order a package?"

Having collected a signature, the mailman tipped his hat, put away the note and scurried away. Fu was left with the box in her hands, wondering what the hell it was, where the hell did it come from, and most importantly, what the hell did it cost. The thing felt heavy and came from some distant address in the west. There were already enough problems with the harvest looking like it'd be ruined by seemingly unkillable parasites. Last thing they needed was an appliance shopping spree.

Jing ran down from the stairs in a hurry.

"Give me that, wife! It's my-"

"Not before you explain!" Fu raised the box with one arm above her head, away from the man's reach. "What's this? How much did you pay for it?"

He scratched his head. "Huh. Nothing."

"Really, Jing? So some foreigner is just sending us heavy packages out of the goodness of their heart? Oh, for the sake of-"

"It's the truth!" the husband joined his hands, pleadingly. "I didn't tell you because I was afraid you'd think it shady or something. But it's a job."
She raised her eyebrows. "Really, now. A job."

"Promise! There was a, huh, ad. You wrote to a certain address and they'd send you a package and instructions, and I'd get money for doing as told. I'm supposed to go drop this thing somewhere near here. Just a couple hours walk."

Well, that did sound shady. But also like it might not be their business any more once the thing was out of their hair.

"How much money?," asked Fu.

The summer passed and turned to its end. As the nights got cooler, still in every bed, in every part of the world, people slept and people dreamed, and now and then, one of those dreams would feel a bit more meaningful, would leave something behind. A thought, a mood, a wish.

There was nothing strange with that.

That's what dreams are like, after all.

September 12, 750

Muscle Tower, Headquarters of the Instruments

Activity in the last weeks at the core of the power of those who followed Piccolo and wished for his return had grown to a paroxysm, and now it was all coming to a head. The day was finally here; the Dragon Balls would return to be active in a matter of minutes. A number of squadrons, specially trained for the occasion, was ready to be deployed from the various bases their forces held across world, as well as infiltrated in areas they didn't control. The orders however would all come from here, where most of the coordinating efforts would take place. The base was fortified and ready to defend itself - the Tower alone was only the core of a vast fortress, with multiple lines of defence, minefields and trenches and palissades spread for kilometres all around it. It wouldn't be enough to stop entirely the full enemy force, but that was not expected to be a problem. Just like the forces of the Instruments would have to spread around the world to seek the Dragon Balls, so would their enemies'.

"Piano, sir, I'm happy to see you join us."

"At ease, soldier."

Piano walked in the main command room, followed closely by Mai, or rather, Violin. The woman was wearing an old Red Ribbon uniform, like most of the soldiers in the base, but the signature bandanna tied around her arm had been removed, and all logos had been partially scrubbed with a black marker. Now the two triangles that made up the original sign of the ribbon had been reduced to a shape reminiscent of a trumpet. Similar markings had been painted on the equipment that the Instruments had subtracted to their previous organisation - that is, almost all of it.

"You show up finally, Piano."

"Cymbal."

The older, smaller ptero nodded in acknowledgement towards his companion. He only spared the
barest of courtesies for him. Their rivalry had only brewed more throughout the months that had passed since the Tournament. Cymbal was now firmly convinced that he’d pushed Piano into irrelevance, and taken full control of the operation. He had put all of his efforts into preparing for the main war, and was now ready to lead it and hog all the glory, whereas Piano had been relegated to coordinating the lesser operations that had preceded it. It was a token gesture, but the older officer had not objected to it. It suited him just fine.

"He's been insolent for a while, now," hissed Violin, eyeing the large, fat ptero. "He'd deserve a lesson."

"A lesson he'll have, Violin," replied Piano, smiling. "Just not now, and not from you. There are better shows of strength than a punch. However much your metallic fist would hurt."

The woman shook her head. "I just wish I had more to do. This job you assigned me-

"-is of the utmost importance. And in fact is a key part of teaching our friend there to stay in his place. Besides, you already made all of this available to us to begin with. Take some pride in that."

His hand gestured towards the massive screen in front of them, showing the map of the world, ready to turn on and glow. Their terminal for a fully functioning Dragon Radar, a design copied from the one used and designed by Pilaf, which Violin had subtracted during the course of her infiltration.

"That was a year ago," replied the woman. "Strength should be tested more often than that."

"Oh, trust me, it will. Now keep it down - here comes Drum."

The large man, with a head of gray hair and his stocky torso stuffed inside a thick sweater, walked to Piano grinning and hit him with a pat on the back. Formerly known as General White, Drum had been in charge of the base since the days in which they were all Red Ribbon. The honour of giving the order would be his.

"Piano, old lizard," he greeted. "Ready for some action?"

"Always, of course." replied Piano. "I live for the challenge."

"You won't have much of that I'm afraid!" Drum laughed. "This will be way too easy. The King's forces are just amassed near his cities, ready to defend them. We're only facing the Ribbon's remnants, it seems. Piece of cake."

With a curt gesture, Drum excused himself, and ran to howl orders again. Their estimate of the exact time at which the Dragon Balls would return active was only approximative, but they had narrowed it down to a twenty minutes interval around midday, Capital time. Because their enemies would probably know the exact time, it was all the more important to react quickly at exactly the right moment. Once the Dragon Balls lighted up and became detectable, it was going to be a race, and whoever reached them first would win.

On their table was a thick metallic box, with a transparent window traversed by a fine metallic mesh. From the opening one could see the inside, where a small stone sphere rested on a foam bottom.

"Turn on the radar!," ordered Drum, and the screen in front of them finally lit up, but showed nothing but noise. A couple technicians started twisting knobs around to remove or cancel the noise coming from other sources, and finally, the map got clear, the screen showing mostly a deep, dark green.

"Now we wait," muttered Cymbal. The large ptero showed signs of impatience and nervousness -
his beak curled and twitched, and his hand clinged hard on the edge of a metal console, the claws producing an unpleasant sound when they occasionally slid and scratched the surface.

And then the screen lit up. Small bright dots, like stars, begun appearing all over it, their light showing the way; one, two, three...

There was a collective gasp. But slowly, the elation turned in puzzlement, then in anger.

"What does this-" whispered Violin, but the hand of her commander stopped her.

"Exactly what I hoped," replied Piano. "This is the moment to act. You go back to our guest. It's time to show Cymbal we're not the chumps he thinks we are. Run, quick, I'll get in touch via phone. For no reason you should leave the room or let anyone else come in."

Violin clicked her heels and left the room at a speedy pace. Piano, meanwhile, turned back at the scene in front of him, which he couldn't help find incredibly amusing.

Of course, it wasn't all too hard to imagine this would be the enemy's plan of action, from what they knew from Violin's report. In fact, they could have done the same themselves, if only someone in charge had the brains to come up with it.

Well, no matter. It had been a small sacrifice to let the idiots run the show for a while, but it could be amply compensated by the satisfaction of finally showing them back into their place, and taking control again, for good. After all, with his little trump card, nothing was lost yet.

Still, he could well see how without knowing about that, the situation could appear confusing and terrifying. He didn't envy his poor, clueless colleagues.

"What is...," muttered Cymbal, staring at the screen in disbelief, "what the fuck is going on...?"

On the table, inside the metal box, the Dragon Ball was back to its former glory, gleaming of a bright orange colour, three red stars inside. Meanwhile, on the massive map screen, not six, not ten or a hundred, but thousands of bright spots lighted up the entire world in an intricate, utterly random constellation.

Chapter End Notes

One more slow update. I hope to pick up the pace but in a way there are bits of the story that I need to go through but don't stimulate me quite as much as others, and combined with other needs and work, it leads me to slowing down my writing. I've decided to try and keep some chapters a bit shorter if it means updating more often, but I still can't just ignore that there are good stopping points. Next chapter anyway is going to be split in two parts of ~7000 words each rather than being a single giant one. If you've looking forward to some more Bulma and Gero interactions and were disappointed by this chapter, don't sweat it too much - there's going to be some flashbacks later. It's been hard to decide how to best structure the narrative in this and the upcoming chapters because there are so many strands to follow at the same time. Lots of things are happening and all matter. I hope I can juggle all of it well enough. Thanks again as usual for all your reads and comments!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!